

CAPTAIN
W. E.
JOHNS

Biggles
IN THE GOBI

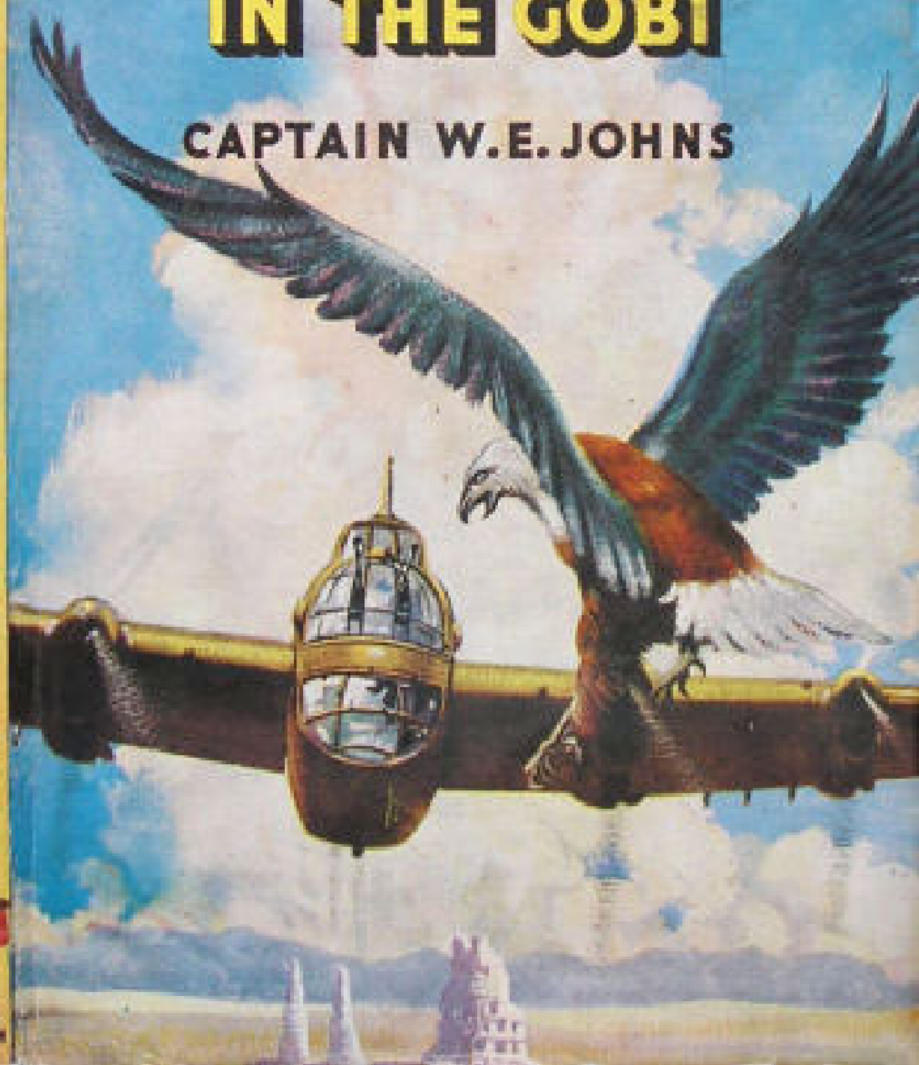


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Biggles

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FOREWORD

SOME regular readers of these stories have complained that Algy has of late been rather pushed into the back-ground. This is to some extent true, but it could not be avoided unless Biggles was to be guilty of the folly of leaving himself without a reserve. In his capacity as Biggles' second-in-command it would naturally fall to Algy to hold the fort in case an operation should go wrong, or Biggles become a casualty. In other words, it is not

good generalship for a commanding officer and his second-in-command to expose themselves to the same risk at the same time, although on occasion it may be unavoidable.

In the following pages we have a case in point. Readers must judge for themselves who took the greatest risk, Biggles or Algy. Anyway, it turned out to be an affair in which Algy found himself in charge, in the actual field of operations. The story is now told in the hope that readers will no longer feel that he is always left 'holding the baby'?

A word about the Gobi. The Desert of Gobi is the general term for the remote, sterile, inmost heart of Asia. The limits are still undefined, but it embraces roughly 300,000 square miles of land which nowhere approaches the sea. Most of it is shifting sands, gravel, rocky masses, or mountains which rise to a great height, the melting snows of which form rivers that, unlike most rivers which flow towards the sea, flow away from it to lose themselves in vast salt marshes. Over thousands of square miles nothing grows but a coarse grass, and a plant, the root of which yields the well-known liquorice. There is no railway. The few roads are mere tracks, deeply rutted by cart or camel caravans proceeding from one water-hole to another, and useless for motor transport. Like most deserts the Gobi suffers from extremes of heat and cold, which produce fierce winds that move the sand from one place to another.

The land is sparsely inhabited by several warlike tribes, mostly nomadic, speaking their own languages and professing different religions. Until comparatively modern times this arid wilderness was a blank on the map, having been seen by half-a-dozen Europeans who, at their peril, entered from the west. China closed the door from the east. The country is dotted with ancient Buddhist shrines, cared for by priests and visited by wandering pilgrims.

All the places named in the following pages really exist, including the Caves of a Thousand Buddhas. The first man to see this amazing shrine, which is of great age, was the famous Asian explorer, Sir Aurel Stein, in 1908. In the Caves he was shown by the guardian priest a secret library that contained printed books dating back to the year 868 A.D.-the oldest books known to exist. It was implied recently in an American magazine (which should have known better) that Sir Aurel Stein stole some of these books. That is untrue. It is correct that he brought some home with him, for no one on the spot could translate them. They are now in the British Museum. But he paid for them with a sum of money sufficient for the Abbot to develop the productivity of the oasis and build a guest-house for the use of visiting pilgrims,

which had long been his ambition.

W. E. J.

CHAPTER 1 VICTIMS OF OPPRESSION

WHEN Biggles and his police pilots filed into the Scotland Yard Headquarters of their Chief, Air Commodore Raymond, one glance at his face was enough to tell them that something unusual was in the air.

"Sit down and make yourselves comfortable," invited the Air Commodore, returning to his desk from the big wall map of the world before which he had been standing when they entered. "This may be a longish session," he added, pushing forward the cigarette box. "I asked you all to come because I have had put to me a matter so complicated that you might as well all hear about it together. Let me make it clear at once that I haven't been instructed to proceed with the case I'm going to tell you about. I have simply been asked if a certain project is technically practicable, and if it is, could it be undertaken by us. Not in an official capacity, however. You'll understand what I mean by that presently."

"So it's one of that sort," murmured Biggles, cynically. "We do the job for the government and if anything goes wrong, the government has never heard of us."

The Air Commodore smiled wryly. "The security of this country is largely maintained by people who are prepared to accept those conditions," he said quietly.

"With the world in a state of chaos, ready to boil over, it is sometimes the only way. However, in this case the motive is humanitarian, not political."

"That's something to be thankful for," observed Biggles, reaching for a cigarette.

"Frankly, in my opinion, the project is not what I call a reasonable risk, chiefly because, in spite of the popular romancing about magic carpets, the aeroplane as a vehicle of transport, still has definite limitations. On the ground, and it must often come to ground, it can

be both useless and helpless. But let me tell you what this is about so that you can judge for yourselves. If you say the prospect, of success are no more than a forlorn hope then I'll make a report to that effect. I want you to look at the thing from the purely practical angle and say exactly what you think."

"I always try to do that," answered Biggles drily, "but as you may have noticed, it is usually the impractical things that we have pushed on to us."

"You needn't tell me," agreed the Air Commodore sadly. "But let us get down to it. In this case, the section of the world with which we are concerned is China, and China is a hefty slice of the earth's surface. To be more precise, it occupies about four million square miles. The actual spot that is worrying us is just about in the centre of Asia, more than a thousand miles from the nearest sea—literally the back of beyond, as you might say. The first difficulty that arises is the political aspect, for the days when a man could wander at will over the face of the globe are finished. China is a Republic. The present government is Communist. That doesn't mean that every Chinaman is a Communist, any more than everyone in Europe behind the Iron Curtain is a Communist. China, is, if you like, behind a bamboo curtain, inasmuch as Russia is in and we are out. We recognise that. After all, China is an ancient land that has had many ups and downs, and what really goes on behind the impassive faces of its present rulers, no European could guess. We are not at war with China, so legally we have as much right there as the Soviet Union. I said legally. In practice it doesn't work out that way. Soviet propaganda has inflamed many of the Chinese against us; but to suggest that after many years of honest trading every Chinaman hates us would be absurd. We still have many friends there, although at the moment, with the Reds in power, they would be foolish to allow that to be known. The result is, in this latest revolution, a great many Western Europeans have been treated abominably, among the greatest sufferers being the missionaries and doctors who have devoted their lives to the improvement of conditions in the more backward parts of the country. This isn't a new story. Missionaries were the first to push into the heart of the country which up to a hundred years ago was practically unknown. Very fine men they were, too. Most of them lost their lives sooner or later. Now history is repeating itself.

"When the crash came some got out. Others stayed. We know that many of these have been brutally murdered. The condition of those still alive is something not nice to think about. Their ultimate fate is bound to be a miserable death. There is nothing we can do about it—

or so it seemed until recently—for we had no idea where they were, and as I said at the beginning, China is a big place."

"I gather you now have some information ?" put in Biggles.

"Yes. Several of these unfortunate people are still alive, having been smuggled—if I can use that word—by friends into the remote heart of the country. Of course, they may all be dead by now, for the man who brought the news, a Chinese priest, was months getting to us. He had to cover, on foot, in appalling conditions, about fifteen hundred miles. He came, he said, to pay a debt. A missionary, one of the refugees, had once saved his life at the risk of losing his own, from, some brigands. These wretched Europeans have no hope of ever getting out. Apart from the likelihood of their being recognised and murdered they couldn't do the journey. They have practically no food and they couldn't get any on the way. Food, as we understand it, where they are is practically non-existent at the best of times. So as things stand, even if they are not betrayed, they will stay where they are until they die—unless"

"Unless someone goes to fetch them out."

"Exactly." After a pause the Air Commodore went on. "There's only one sort of vehicle capable of making the journey—an aeroplane. The absence of roads knocks out any other form of mechanical transport."

"What is the great difficulty about fetching them if you know where they, are? " queried Biggles.

"There are several. First, there is the distance to be covered without being seen by hostile eyes and intercepted. Having succeeded in that, the actual place must be located. After flying a compass course for more than a thousand miles over country that all looks alike, that would not be easy. Then, to cap all, there is the hazard of getting down on unsurveyed ground knowing that a crack-up, if not serious in itself, would result in the rescue party being in the same hopeless plight as the people they were trying to rescue."

"What about the fellow who brought the news? Where is he now? "

"In Hongkong."

"Does he want to go back ? I'm thinking of a guide." The Air Commodore shrugged. "He might go. He could be asked."

"Who was he exactly ? "

The Air Commodore referred to the docket on his desk. "A Chinese priest named Feng-tao, who was making a pilgrimage to Lhasa when he halted at the sanctuary and saw who was there."

"I take it that as these people of ours have to eat, they are being looked after by friends?"

"Yes, friendly Chinese."

"How many refugees are there?"

"There were eleven when the man left but others might arrive."

Biggles grimaced. "Quite a crowd. Are they all British?"

"No. Many countries had missionaries and doctors—the two things often go together—working in China. According to the particulars I have here there are six British, four men and two women. The others are, one American, one Swede, one Dutch, a Frenchman and a Swiss. We have the names of some of them. Most of these people have spent years in the country so they know the languages and customs; but that alone isn't enough to get them out."

"You spoke just now of a sanctuary. Are these people in a temple? "

"Something of the sort. Did you ever hear of the Caves of a Thousand Buddhas? "

"No. That's a new one for me."

"Well, the place is pretty well known, although as it is practically inaccessible, few Europeans have seen it. It consists of a cliff honeycombed with innumerable caves, most of them interconnected and all wonderfully painted or decorated with images of Buddha. The whole place is artificial and of great age. It is believed that there are still secret recesses that no white man has ever seen. These particular caves, for there are many similar shrines in Central Asia, were first made known by the explorer, Sir Aurel Stein in 1908. He came upon them when travelling from India to China. There is a guardian priest in charge. But this is not the actual place where the refugees are hiding. There is a similar shrine in the same region."

"What particular region are you talking about?"

"It's near Tunhwang. You'll find it on the map. It's a town near the junction of Sinkiang and Mongolia, sometimes called in the flowery

language of the country, The Gateway to the Terrible Desert of Gobi. Some twenty miles southward there is an oasis named Nan-hu. It's on a stream called the Tang River. The Caves with which we are concerned are in a cliff that overlooks the stream."

"Sounds a bit vague."

"Of course it's vague. In such a country it couldn't be otherwise. There isn't a road anywhere near. The nearest track worth calling a road is about a hundred miles to the north. Look for Ansi on the map and you'll find it on the one road that marches across Asia to Europe, the old Silk Road, probably the oldest road in the world, and certainly the longest, for it wanders a quarter of the way round the globe. For thousands of years this road was no more than the usual track used by pilgrims and merchant caravans. Now the Russians have given it some sort of a surface and call it The Red Highway. Over it roll convoys carrying war stores to Korea. We understand that the ancient hostelries have been replaced by barracks and refuelling stations, with telephones and radio. Russian planes follow the road so you'd better keep clear of it. Of course, the whole zone is under Soviet influence."

"You mean there are airfields?"

"Yes. But as far as we know there is nothing nearer to the Caves than Hami or Suchow, both about two hundred miles away. They're no use to you."

Biggles smiled. "I wasn't thinking of using them."

The Air Commodore referred again to the docket. "I have here all the information available. Someone has been very thoroughly into the position, gleaning a lot of interesting details from the people who managed to get home when they saw what was coming. For instance, there are two or three landmarks. First, there is the Tang River. Then, a little way off, there is another famous rendezvous for pilgrims known as the Lake of the Crescent Moon. This is a small lake of intensely blue water lying among the dunes of sheer desert—something of a phenomenon. Moreover, near the lake, an inspired priest has improved the scenery by planting a line of poplars. So apart from the unique shape of the lake, the trees, where there are no other trees for miles and miles, should be outstanding. This lake, you understand, is, quite close to Nan-hu, which, as I think I told you, is the place where our people are hiding. They are being taken care of in the guest-house by a saintly man who, unless he has been removed by the Russians, is well disposed towards us. I mention these details in

passing in case you should ever find yourself there. There is only one other landmark near Nan-hu, and that is a small disused temple with a ruined tower and a crypt below. It should be possible to see it from the air."

"Where actually are the Caves?"

"They are in the cliff that rises up from the stream. The name of the guardian of this place, by the way, is Ching-fu. He must be taking risks looking after our people, who, apart from anything else, must be straining his frugal resources to the utmost. Of course, by the time you get there, if you decide to go, the man, and the little guest-house in which he lives, may have disappeared."

Biggles stubbed his cigarette. "Is that all?"

"Well, that's the main outline, enough to give you an idea of what we're asked to tackle. Naturally, the government would like to rescue these people if it's humanly possible; but they're not prepared to plunge the country into another war to achieve that. The question is, is a rescue attempt a feasible proposition?"

"You're asking me ? " said Biggles quietly. "Yes."

"Then let me get this clear. The Caves are actually in the Chinese Republic?"

"Yes."

"Neither we, nor Russia, are at war with China, or with each other, so strictly speaking we have as much right in China as the Russians."

"Strictly speaking, yes. But for all practical purposes, no. We haven't the right to fly over China without permission."

"Russian planes are flying across China."

"No doubt they have permission since they are providing the Chinese with certain things they require, such as money and munitions. It would be a waste of time for us to request such facilities. Even if China said yes, the Russians would say no, and at the moment the Russians are calling the tune. Even if the Russians agreed, would you care to fly an unarmed machine through their fighters?"

Biggles smiled bleakly. "Not unless I was prepared to commit suicide."

"That's what I thought. So you see, officially the government can do nothing. But of course," went on the Air Commodore slowly, "if a private individual tried to fly across China it would be a different matter altogether. The government could pretend to know nothing about it. Don't frown. That's how things are done nowadays. But even in such circumstances an incident might lead to trouble. Things in the Far East are so critical that it needs only a spark to start a conflagration."

The Air Commodore's eyes were on Biggles' face. "Well, what do you think about it?"

"Is there any desperate urgency about a decision?"

"No, although obviously every day's delay is bound to make matters more serious for the refugees."

Biggles picked up a ruler and a large magnifying glass from the table and walked over to the map that covered the wall. Standing close, he studied it for some time in silence, occasionally using the ruler to plot courses or measure distances. Then he said: "The nearest point from which we might be allowed to operate seems to be Dacca, in Pakistan. It's almost directly south of the objective."

"Quite right," agreed the Air Commodore. "That would mean flying over the Himalayas and Thibet—the so-called Top of the World."

"The eastern approach could only be from Hongkong, which is not only farther away by some hundreds of miles but would mean flying over such thickly populated country that we couldn't hope to escape observation. My choice would be from the south, over Assam, Bhutan and Thibet, where anyone seeing us wouldn't pay much attention."

"You would have to fly over some of the worst country in the world."

Biggles shrugged. "A forced landing either way would probably finish us. I'd rather ram a mountain than end up in a Chinese jail."

"What aircraft would you like?"

Biggles thought for a moment. "A Halifax would do it comfortably. I make the run about thirteen hundred miles each way. Petrol for three thousand miles should give us a fair margin. To be on the safe side, as we shouldn't have much of a load to carry on the way out, we could install a reserve tank. No doubt the Air Force could find us a Halifax."

"But that's a service machine," protested the Air Commodore. "I said the government couldn't be implicated."

"I believe quite a few Halifaxes have been sold for conversion to civil transportation," Biggles pointed out. "We should take most of the war load off to save weight. Some seating accommodation and a coat of paint should make the machine look as tame as a charabanc."

The Air Commodore looked at Biggles suspiciously. "What do you mean by most of the war load?"

"I was hoping you wouldn't ask that question," parried Biggles.

Raymond looked alarmed. "You can't carry guns. If you shoot somebody the fat will be in the fire."

Biggles nodded. "And if somebody shoots me, my fat will be in the fire. I'd rather theirs than mine. Don't worry. I shan't shoot unless I'm shot at; but when I'm shot at I shoot back. It's just a bad habit of mine that I haven't been able to cure. We can always jettison our guns if we had to go down."

The Air Commodore looked doubtful. "I don't like it."

"Put it this way," argued Biggles. "If we're shot down, we shall be recognised as British and there'll be a row anyway. If we're not shot down there can't be a row because there will be no evidence. If the government is challenged it can say that it can't be held responsible for all the Halifaxes now floating loose. The thing is, therefore, not to be shot down: The best way of preventing that is to have a good gun with a good man behind it."

The Air Commodore frowned. "Why do you have to be so difficult?"

Biggles looked hurt. "Me? Difficult? I like that. I'm the last man to want trouble. It's the other side that's making the difficulties. Surely you wouldn't expect any man in his right mind to jump unarmed into a den of ravening wolves? I must be crazy to offer to jump into the den at all, but I'm not that crazy."

"All right," consented the Air Commodore wearily. "Have it your own way. But for heaven's sake watch what you're doing."

"Believe you me," replied Biggles warmly, "I shall be as watchful as a dove making for home through a sky stiff with buzzards."

"Then I can take it that you're prepared to go?"

"Of course I'll go. You knew I'd go. At least, I hope you did. I'd be pained if you thought I'd sit around flying an office desk while decent people are being hounded to death by a mob of fanatics waving red flags."

"What are you going to do about landing when you get there?"

"That's my big worry," admitted Biggles. "The problem will need some serious thought. But you'd better leave the operational details to me or we may get at loggerheads again. I'll take this docket if you don't mind and get cracking on it."

"Is there anything I can do, apart from getting the Halifax?"

Biggles stroked his chin. "There's one thing, if it could be managed. How about getting hold of the fellow who brought in this news? I shan't be near Hongkong. He could be flown over here in a few days. He should be able to give us some local gen, such as possible landing grounds near the caves and the sort of weather we're likely to meet."

"It's summer in Central China now, so the weather should be good, if unpleasantly hot. But you should miss the howling winds that make life hell in the Gobi for most of the year."

Biggles nodded. "We can do without that," he said soberly.

"I'll see if I can get hold of this fellow. As you say, he may be able to help you to locate the objective, or give you a general picture of the country."

Biggles picked up the docket. "I'll see you again before I go, sir."

As the door closed behind him the Air Commodore shook his head dubiously and reached for another cigarette. But only he knew what he was thinking.

CHAPTER II OUTWARD BOUND

A FORTNIGHT later, under a serene sky ablaze with stars, a dun-coloured Halifax, displaying no insignia or registration marks, made a covert take-off from the parched airfield at Dacca, in Pakistan, and

bored its way, climbing steadily, into the vague emptiness that lay to the north.

Ginger was beside Biggles in the cockpit, their faces ghastly in the eerie light reflected from the luminous dials on the instrument panel. Algy occupied the forward gun turret and Bertie the tail, all places having been decided by drawing lots. The centre turret was not manned, but it could of course be filled in an emergency by leaving only one pilot in the cockpit. There were mobile machine guns in all three stations, and as there is a walk-way down the full length of the Halifax, places could be changed at any time.

The radio compartment, not being in use, was empty, but the navigator's room, easily accessible, was occupied by a figure as strange as ever sat at the chart table of a heavy bomber. He was a little man with a yellowish complexion and slanting eyes that were no more than slits in his face. This was Feng-tao, the Chinese priest, the man whose tragic news had been responsible for the expedition.

Actually, Feng-tao had been a disappointment, although, to be fair, this was through no fault of his. To start with, his knowledge of the English language was practically nil, so conversation had to be conducted through an interpreter. He was amiable, and willing enough to fly. Indeed, he was anxious to return to his friends. But he could tell them little or nothing they did not already know. As was to be expected, he knew nothing whatever about aviation, so his advice about landing possibilities—the chief reason for his presence—was not to be relied on. He was emphatic, however, about there being a lot of sand. This, it seemed, was mostly in the form of dunes, which, disconcertingly, moved about when the wind blew. Biggles was by no means sure that the priest would recognise the place from the air. However, there was a chance that his knowledge of local languages would make him a useful ally on the ground in an emergency. A parachute had been brought for him. Its purpose and method of employment had been explained, but he seemed so indifferent about its use that Ginger was quite certain that if ever he attempted

to use it he would go straight into the ground like a brick.

Biggles was, of course, flying by dead reckoning, although a few possible landmarks had been noted—exceptionally high mountains, rivers, and Lhasa, the capital of Thibet, which lay close to their track. From this remote town one of the few roads that crossed Central Asia ran almost due north for five hundred miles before swinging away to the east for another thousand miles to join the Red Highway at

Lanchow. Such landmarks had been memorised not only from the map but from air reconnaissance survey photographs made available by the Air Ministry.

Biggles knew, as all experienced, pilots know, that the success or failure of a long-distance flight depends largely on the preparations made before the start; for which reason nothing that could be done had been left undone. Even so, as it is impossible to guarantee absolutely the reliability of any mechanical device, all those in the Halifax knew perfectly well—although they did not talk about it—that engine or structural failure of any sort, over such country as would be below them for the next five hours, could have only one ending. The same conditions would apply on the return passage.

The Halifax continued its long climb, for in front of it, and stretching for hundreds of miles on either side, were the mighty Himalayas, with many peaks reaching well above twenty thousand feet. Everest, the highest of them all, lay a full hundred miles west of their track, so it seemed unlikely that they would see it. Not that any of them particularly wanted to see it, for should they get off their course in bad visibility it would be a menace.

Beyond the Himalayas lay Thibet, a vast, little-known tableland, itself a maze of plains and valleys averaging sixteen thousand feet with ridges and peaks rising several thousand feet higher.

The reason why Biggles had chosen to make the flight by night was in order to escape observation from the ground, which might lead to interception in the air. In the ordinary way, that is, unless their presence was detected and reported, there seemed little risk of meeting other aircraft, military or civil. So he had timed his take-off to arrive over the objective at dawn, thus exposing himself in the minimum of daylight. A secondary reason was for visibility. From enquiries they had made there seemed less chance during the hours of darkness of being troubled by mist or cloud. Daylight would of course be required for finding the caves, and for the landing when they went down. This part of the operation, as Biggles had realised from the outset, would be the most difficult phase, and no definite decision had been made about it.

There had been long debates about this, culminating in a plan which, while it might involve more flying, would greatly reduce the risk of landing, when, as they all knew, the slightest mishap would inevitably be fatal.

Arriving over the objective they would examine the ground as closely as circumstances permitted. If a level area, free from obstructions, could be found within a reasonable distance of the caves, they would land. Otherwise, Algy and Ginger would drop by parachute and search for a suitable site. If necessary, supposing there to be an area on which a landing strip could be made, they would muster the refugees, set them to clear it and mark it out. It was extremely unlikely that the aircraft could wait while this was being done. It might fly round for an hour, not more, although even this would be dangerous. Rather than wait longer Biggles would take the machine back to Pakistan and return a week later, a sufficient lapse of time, it was thought, for a landing-strip to be completed should the surface of the ground hold out any promise of this. If there was no possible hope of ever getting down within many miles, then Feng-tao would be dropped, with a good supply of condensed food, and the project abandoned. There was just a chance that the refugees, with sufficient stores, might be able to make their way on foot to India, Burma or Hongkong.

Should it be decided to drop Algy and Ginger they would take walkie-talkie radio with them, but as the risks attached to its employment were evident it was only to be used in dire emergency. Alternatively they would have to rely on visual signals. In a word, the most dangerous part of the operation was still, literally as well as figuratively, in the air.

Actually, Biggles was hopeful about getting down. A close study of the best maps available, and these were rather better than he expected, showed that Tunhwang was beyond the great mountain plateaux, the so-called Roof of the World. It lay in a depression more or less surrounded by vast deserts. Deserts are not necessarily flat; nor are they always sandy. For a man who had lived his life among them Feng-tao was sadly vague. True, he said there was plenty of sand, much of it flat; but his idea of flat, in a wilderness of undulations, of dunes and water-worn ravines, might be only comparative. Even if there was level sand it might be soft, which would be not merely useless but dangerous, since it was likely to trip the machine and throw it on its nose. Even if this did not happen the wheels might sink, and becoming clogged, effectually prevent the aircraft from ever getting off again—a hazard well known in the Middle East, where more than one pilot, landing on flat but treacherous ground, has perished miserably.

The Halifax droned on through the cold night air. Overhead, the stars were a thing to wonder at. They filled the sky to reveal below, from horizon to horizon, a world of white, frozen sterility. But not until the

disc of the moon rose clear was it possible to appreciate fully the awful beauty of the scene, a scene that could not have been more strange and remote had they been flying across the face of the moon.

It seemed impossible that the steaming jungles of India, which they had so recently left, could belong to the same world. On all sides now the unconquered monarchs of the Himalayas reared their mighty heads. Between them yawned glacier-filled chasms, sometimes with walls as sheer as if cut by an axe. As a spectacle it was sublime, unreal but terrifying, and instinctively Ginger found himself listening for any change in the monotonous drone of the engines on which their wings depended for support; for should they fail, the aircraft and its crew must disappear for ever, as utterly as a stone dropped in the deepest sea.

This fearful world of ice and snow seemed to go on for ever. Ginger, anxious for the scene to change, thought it never would. It fascinated yet appalled him. He couldn't tear his eyes away, and he found the strain of hanging poised between life and death exhausting. The machine was not always steady. Although it was flying at over twenty thousand feet there were times when the snow and ice looked uncomfortably close. Indeed, more than once, it was necessary to change course slightly to avoid a hoary-headed giant. On one occasion they passed between two, and for a minute diverted air-streams clutched like hands at the plane and threatened to drag it to destruction.

It was bitterly cold. Not for nearly two hours did the ground begin to show signs of falling away, and even then for some time isolated peaks stood like ghostly sentinels watching the passage of the intruder through their domain.

It was a relief when a cluster of lights showed for a little while far away on the port side. Not only was it with relief that Ginger gazed at them. For some reason he was astonished, for he had come to regard this section of the earth as uninhabited.

"Lhasa," said Biggles, and conveyed the information to the others over the intercom. "We're on our track," he added.

Another three quarters of an hour passed before he spoke again. Then, to Ginger, he said: "We should be crossing the road to Hanchow any time now. I don't suppose it'll be much of a road, but it will probably be sunken and may cast a shadow. See if you can spot it. We don't really need it but it would serve to check our position."

Ginger did not succeed in finding the road, but he made out a river, which from his map he knew must be the headwaters of the Yangtze, which, after nearly four thousand miles, finally wanders into the China Sea.

Half an hour later the eastern sky shivered into the dawn of another day. Never had Ginger been so glad to see the sun and a cloudless sky. As it turned slowly blue, and the aircraft began to lose height that was no longer required, he surveyed the terrain below and ahead with curiosity and interest, aware that he was gazing at the very centre of Asia, something that few western eyes had seen.

He knew from the documents relating to the case, which he had read, roughly what to expect, so he was not surprised to find that nothing stood out clearly from a background that all looked very much alike; a limitless expanse of undulating sand or gravel from which rose shapeless hills and mountain ridges of rock or sandstone. He noted some broad areas of what might have been scrub, or grass, or possibly marsh; but for the most part the ground appeared to be a desolate wilderness. There were no trees. He could not pick out anything that looked like a dwelling, or even the smoke of caravan fires, although the machine was still high for such details to be picked out even if they were there.

Still losing height, the engines doing little more than tick over, the Halifax cruised on.

After a time Biggles said: "We must be getting close. You might get Feng-tao to have a look round to see if he can identify anything."

Ginger went down to the navigation compartment to find the Chinaman blissfully sleeping. Waking him he indicated by signs what was required.

Feng-tao looked down; he looked long and hard; but Ginger soon perceived from the blank expression on his face that he was wasting his time. He gave him five minutes and then went back to Biggles. "He hasn't a clue," he reported briefly.

"Then try to pick out something yourself," ordered Biggles. "You've got the gen." He made the same request to the others over the intercom.

As Biggles had said, they had the gen; not much, but possibly enough for recognition. The particular caves that were the final objective were at Nan-hu, an oasis lying roughly fifteen to twenty miles south of Tunhwang. The oasis, so-called, was a strip of cultivated ground on

the edge of the Gobi Desert, that followed one side of a small stream known as the Tang River. The opposite bank was a sandstone cliff in which the caves had been cut. Ginger could see nothing that looked like an oasis, the reason being, as was ascertained later, that there was no oasis in the sense that the word is understood, in Egypt. For some time, although the machine had lost a good deal of height, he could see nothing but sand or gravel and bare hills. However, he continued to search the ground. He knew as well as anyone the limitations of a map, which after all is only a piece paper on which have been printed names and conventional marks to represent the more important physical features. When these features are numerous and outstanding the map serves its purpose well enough; but over a section of the earth's surface that can show no dominant feature, or where such features as do exist are all alike, it is of little practical use. Below the aircraft, Ginger recalled, were nearly six million square miles of mostly desert, which nowhere touched a sea; a phenomenon which occurred nowhere else on earth. In other words, they were now as far removed from any ocean it was possible to be. As Biggles had so often remarked, it is one thing to look at a map, but a different matter altogether when one is faced with the same thing in reality.

The aircraft was now down to two thousand feet and Biggles began to cast around in a wide circle. "I don't want to overshoot Tunhwang and show ourselves unnecessarily," he said.

This told Ginger that they had reached their E.T.A.—the Estimated Time of Arrival. In other words, had the machine kept unswervingly on its course, according to the time they had been in the air, at their speed they should now be over the objective. This is how long-distance flights are worked out in theory, but they do not always work out that way in practice, unless, of course, the objective is something big, like a city, which can be observed from a distance of miles, enabling the pilot to make the necessary correction. There was no reason to suppose that the aircraft had deviated from its course, or that there had been an error in Biggles' calculations, so the objective should not be far away; but the trouble was, as Ginger realised, they didn't know exactly what they were looking for; or put another way, they had no indication of how it would appear from the air. In any case, it would be an object so small in such a vast area that it might easily pass unnoticed. They could be within a mile or two of it, which would be very good navigation indeed, and still not see it.

One factor at least was comforting. There appeared to be plenty of places where a landing might be effected with reasonable safety. The ground was seldom quite flat, but here, at any rate, neither the dunes

nor the hills were of any great height, as was made clear by the shortness of their shadows, for the sun was still low in the sky.

CHAPTER III FENG-TAO TAKES A CHANCE

AT this critical stage of the operation there occurred two incidents which had an immediate effect on the situation. Ginger's eyes, roving ceaselessly, detected a movement on the ground for the first time. A small black object had changed its shape; and as watched it, he saw it move again. As he could think of no object that would itself be black, he decided that it must be a shadow. But only a moving object could throw a moving shadow. What was it? Staring hard, he could just distinguish a faint wavering line that disappeared at intervals where the ground was rocky. It could, he thought, be a track. The shadow was on it. By concentrating he made out the object to be two horsemen, close together. They had stopped and were looking up at the machine. Had the horses not moved restlessly they might well have passed unnoticed, for the animals, the men's clothes, and even their faces, were the same colour as the ground under them. The only thing that stood out clearly was the shadow, much elongated while the sun was low. But even this would have escaped detection had the beasts remained still.

While Ginger was still watching, for it did not occur to him that the earth-bound travellers could have any bearing on their own enterprise, Feng-tao appeared in a state nearer to excitement than Ginger would have thought possible from the man's normal imperturbability. Talking volubly in his own language, which of course conveyed nothing, he gesticulated, pointing down again and again with a stabbing finger.

The futility of having a guide whose language they could not understand was now apparent; but it was fairly clear from his pantomime that he was directing them to go down. Whether or not he had seen the horsemen was not so clear.

With the machine still circling, Ginger discussed the matter with Biggles.

"Do you think he can see the caves, or the river because I'm dashed if I

can?" asked Biggles.

"I don't think so, but we must be close. At any rate, he obviously wants us to land."

"I don't get it, but perhaps I'd better go down," decided Biggles. "It's no use having a guide if we ignore his directions. We can't go on using petrol at this rate, anyhow."

For the next few minutes, while the big machine sank slowly towards the floor of the wilderness and the details of the surface hardened in outline, Ginger sat still. This was it. On Biggles's judgment he knew he could rely, but in making a landing anywhere outside a place designed for the purpose there was always the unknown quantity to be reckoned with. Biggles was a little while making up his mind. He made several trial runs very low over several sections of the stony plain before deciding. Then he came round on what was obviously to be the attempt. Ginger held his breath when the wheels touched; but the aircraft ran on with hardly a bump to as smooth a landing as it had ever made. Ginger, relaxing, saw the horsemen looking in their direction, about two hundred yards away. They did not move.

There were now some seconds of confusion. Feng-tao talked, smiled, nodded, waved his arms and did more pointing.

"I think he wants to get out," said Biggles.

They let him out. In fact, they all got out, glad of an opportunity to stretch their legs.

"What's he up to?" said Biggles frowning, as Feng-tao ran over to the horsemen.

"Asking them the way, maybe," answered Algy. He said this really as a joke, but it turned out to be true. There was more arm waving and pointing; then the Chinaman, looking pleased with himself, came back.

Walking up to Biggles he pointed to the east and opened and closed the fingers of his right hand seven times. "*Li*," he said, and repeated the finger business. He need not have done so, for his meaning was plain.

"Thirty-five *Li*," said Biggles, in a queer tone of voice. "That's about thirteen or fourteen miles. For heaven's sake! "

Ginger could have struck the satisfied grin from the yellow face. Feng-tao had meant well, of course. Seeing the horsemen, blissfully unaware of the dangers attending such a landing, he had decided to ask the way, a custom common in all desert countries, where the usual greeting is: "Where are you going?" or "Where are you from?" But when Ginger thought of the risks they had taken, for very little purpose as far as he could see, he nearly choked.

"What are you going to do, old boy?" enquired Bertie, casually polishing his eye-glass.

"Fourteen miles is too far to walk," answered Biggles. "We aren't equipped for a route march over this sort of country. It'll be as hot as hades presently. We might lose our way. Besides, it would take too long. I daren't risk it. Nor am I prepared to risk the machine by taxying over an unknown surface. We shall have to find a landing-place nearer than this. We know the direction of the place we're looking for—at least, I hope that's what he's trying to tell us. What I don't like is, Feng must have told those blokes where we were going in order to find out the way."

They all turned to look at the horsemen, who had now moved nearer. They were a wild-looking pair; not that there was anything remarkable about that, considering where they were. Both were dressed alike in bright-coloured pointed caps trimmed with lambskin, fur coats and high boots with high heels.

"Kirghiz," said Feng-tao, observing the object of their interest.

Biggles shrugged. The word meant little. "Let's get back in the machine," he said. They returned to their places and the machine took off on its short trip to the Caves—as they hoped.

"Fourteen miles at the end of a twelve hundred mile trip, and a night flight at that, is pretty good," said Ginger, aware that the longer a cross-country flight the greater is the possible margin of error.

There is no doubt that the simplicity of this first landing lured everyone into the belief that it could be repeated nearer to the objective. Had they known what they were presently to discover, that this was not the case, they might have been more concerned about the two horsemen who were now making off at full gallop. As it was, the men were hardly given another thought. Ginger did say to Biggles: "I hope those blokes won't talk about what they've seen." To which Biggles replied: " They probably will: in fact they are sure to gossip

about an event so unusual. It doesn't matter if they do. We ought to be away long before they can do any harm. From the direction they took they're making for Tunhwang, and that's some distance."

By this time, with the machine flying low, they were able to observe with growing concern that the terrain was becoming more and more broken. For the most part it was now typical desert country—sand dunes, or low hills with shallow basins between them, some large, some small, but all filled with sand, stones, loose rocks and an occasional dead shrub of some sort.

"I don't think much of this," remarked Biggles, eyeing the ground with misgiving.

Then, suddenly, as they skimmed over a bluff, there before them was a stream and an oasis; a trickle of water fringed with green so neatly tucked under a low cliff that Ginger was not surprised that they had failed to spot it. It was narrow and still in shadow, so it could have been seen from nowhere except immediately overhead.

Feng-tao, his face wreathed in smiles, shouted "Nanhu!"

"Good, we're here," said Biggles, and swinging the machine round began looking for the best place to get down. His circles became wider as he sought in vain. Ten minutes sufficed to show that such a place did not exist. In fact, ironically enough, they could find nowhere nearer than the spot on which they had already landed. It was maddening, but from that very point the terrain had begun to change. There were depressions quite close to the oasis that would have been plenty large enough for their purpose had they not been cluttered with obstructions such as pieces of rock, and dead, wind-warped, shrubby trees.

Biggles examined each depression closely for a possible chance, but at the finish he shook his head and said: "No use."

"Would you believe it?" muttered Ginger savagely. "Easily," answered Biggles, smiling sadly.

"So near and yet so far."

"Platitudes won't help."

"What are you going to do?"

"That's what I'm trying to work out."

"How about dropping a message asking the people below to clear that big depression?"

"Hopeless. It would take days. The job would have to be done properly or it would merely become a trap."

"How about going back to the place where we landed?"

"The arguments against it still apply."

"So what?"

"We shall have to fall back on the alternative scheme."

"We came prepared for it."

"You mean, me and Algy drop in?"

"I can't see anything else for it."

"How about me going down, getting the people together, and marching them to the place where we landed?"

"That would probably take longer than us marching to them," answered Biggles. "Even if all these people are fit, which seems doubtful, they couldn't make more than a mile an hour over the country we've just covered. You know what soft sand dunes are like. It would be brutal to take some and leave others behind. Even if they could do the distance, I don't like the idea of sitting in the open all day so near the track to Tunhwang. If we were spotted, instead of rescuing these people, we might do them more harm than good."

Ginger did not answer.

"I'll take the machine home with Bertie," went on Biggles. "You go down with Algy and fix up a landing strip. I don't see any great difficulty about that. I'll come back a week to-day. That should give you plenty of time. I'm making allowance for the job being tougher than it looks. One can't tell from up here."

"Fair enough," agreed Ginger.

"Take the radio with you, but don't use it unless you have to. Push the stores out—you'll need them. See that Feng gets his harness on properly."

"Leave it to me."

Biggles told Algy over the inter-com what he had decided to do, and then, while preparations were being made, climbed into position at a suitable height.

On the first run three heavy containers of stores were parachuted down. On the next run Feng-tao stepped out into space. He got down all right, but nearly gave Ginger a heart attack by making a dangerously long delayed drop. It looked as if he had forgotten to pull his ring. On the final run Algy and Ginger went down at close intervals, and five minutes later, on firm ground, having waved okay to the machine, they were helping Feng out of his harness.

With the drone of the engines fading they got the three containers together and then sat down on their brollies to await the arrival of the people from the oasis to help them carry the stuff in. This, they were sure, could not long be delayed, for they were only a matter of two hundred yards or so from the brink of the cliff, although a low dune intervened.

Ten minutes passed. The sun struck down, and the heat on the open sand was becoming unbearable.

Algy remarked, casually: "They're a long time."

Feng, watching the top of the dune, seemed puzzled by the delay.

Another ten minutes passed. "They can't be coming," declared Ginger. "Maybe they take us for enemies. Let's get out of this sun. I'm being fried."

"Yes, I think we'd better walk over," agreed Algy. "We can take our brollies and come back for the other stuff later."

Ginger assented.

The intervening dune was only a shallow one, but it was enough to prove how right Biggles had been in his decision not to attempt any long marches. The wind-blown sand was light, flimsy stuff, into which they sank above the ankles and then slipped back for half the stride. In the dry, scorching heat, every step was an effort. They slipped most of the way down the reverse slope, which was steeper. However, they got to the bottom and walked onto the edge of the cliff. There was nothing formidable about it. Nowhere was it more than sixty feet high.

It was not until this moment, when he looked down, that there dawned in Ginger's mind an uneasy suspicion that all was not well. Not only was there not a soul in sight but an unnatural hush hung over the place. The guest-house, on the edge of a pathetic-looking little orchard almost immediately below them, had that forlorn and desolate look which an unoccupied building soon acquires. The small cultivated patches of ground where

crops had been grown were trampled flat. A faint, unpleasant smell was perceptible. Ginger's lips dried suddenly for he had smelt corruption before.

"There's something wrong here," said Algy. His voice was low and strained. His eyes were active. Ginger glanced at Feng, who was staring down. His lower jaw had sagged, and there was an expression on his face that Ginger did not like at all.

"Let's go down," said Algy shortly.

"We may be stepping into something."

"There's nobody here," replied Algy. "We shall have to go down anyway. We can't sit up here for a week. Let's get it over."

They soon found the narrow path that traversed the cave-pitted face of the cliff. Ignoring the placid-faced Buddhas that had kept long and silent watch over the scene, they went on to the bottom and walked quickly towards the one building the place boasted. On their way the evil smell became more pronounced and they saw a dead horse which someone had made an unsuccessful effort to cover with sand.

Going on, Algy stooped and picked something from the ground. He held it up. It was a brass cartridge case. "It's no use trying to kid ourselves any longer," he said quietly, tossing the case aside. "We've come too late."

CHAPTER IV TRAGEDY AT NAN-HU

SLOWLY now, looking to left and right as if fearful of what they might find next, they went on to the guesthouse, a mud-brick building comprising a single hall with small cubicles leading off it. The hall was silent and deserted. There were ominous stains on the uncovered

floor. Without speaking Algy pointed to what were obviously bullet holes in the walls.

There, for a minute, they stood, looking around. Feng began to mutter brokenly to himself.

"Let's get outside," said Algy presently. "There's an atmosphere about this place I don't like."

"I've noticed it," answered Ginger, in a low voice.

They returned slowly to the door, beyond which bars of sunlight were turning the sand to streaming gold. Nobody spoke. There seemed to be nothing more to say. That disaster had struck the oasis appeared all too evident. Although there had always, been this possibility, somehow, such is human optimism, they were unprepared for it, and the shock of their discovery left them temporarily speechless.

Without any particular object in view they moved on into the open and looked about them. Signs of strife were not wanting. Everything was trampled and in disorder. There were hoof marks in soft ground, and lying amongst them were expended cartridges for weapons of several different calibres. Algy picked up a knife with a ferocious curved blade. Most significant of all was a large mound of newly turned earth.

Algy caught Ginger's eye. "That, I imagine, is where they're buried," he said in the calm voice of one who is resigned to the worst.

Ginger became practical. "We'd better get that food in, and out of sight, in case we have visitors," he suggested grimly. "This place gives me the willies, but we've got to stick a week of it." What he was really thinking was how the three of them, in that time, were going to clear the big depression of obstacles so that Biggles could land and pick them up. Watch would have to be kept, too, in order that they were not taken by surprise at the work.

His eyes went up to the rows of holes in the face of the cliff. Had it not been for the guardian Buddhas, he thought, they would have looked like an enormous colony of sand martin nests. Suddenly he stiffened. Without altering his tone of voice he said to Algy: "Don't stare, but there's somebody in those caves."

"Are you sure?"

"I saw a face."

"One of the statues."

"No. It moved. It peeped out and then drew back."

"If, as it seems, somebody is hiding there, I don't think we have anything to fear," averred Algy. "If there is someone there, as we shall be here for a week and we're bound to bump into them sooner or later, I suggest we settle the matter now."

Ginger answered. "This place is spooky enough without having faces quizzing us. Give a hail."

Algy cupped his hands round his mouth and called "Hi! Anyone up there?"

Instantly a man appeared on the ledge. "Who are you?" he shouted.

"English," replied Algy. "We came to fetch some people home."

The man spun round, apparently to speak to someone in the cave behind him. Turning back he called: We'll come down."

"Some of them are all right, anyhow," said Ginger hopefully. "That chap looks British and he's not alone."

The man above started down the narrow path. From the cave behind him emerged no fewer than four persons, one man and two women, clearly Europeans, and a Chinese. All were dressed more or less alike in the thick padded garments of the country—trousers tied in at the waist and ankles and thick rope sandals. At the time Ginger wondered at this, but he was soon to discover that while by day the rarefied air could be raised to blistering heat by the sun, the nights could be bitterly cold.

Feng-tao came to life when he saw his countryman, whom apparently he recognised, for there was a short conversation between them in their own language.

In a few minutes the two parties were facing each other on the open ground in front of the guest-house. The four whites looked weary and emaciated, but they managed to raise a smile of greeting.

Algy raised his hat to the ladies. One was middle-aged, but the other was quite young. "I think you must be Miss Summers and Miss Treves," he said, remembering the names from the documents about the case.

"Yes. I am Miss Summers and this is Miss Treves," answered the elder of the two women.

"Glad to meet you," continued Algy, looking from one to the other. "The government heard of your plight, so we were asked to fly a plane out and fetch you home. Unfortunately we couldn't find anywhere to land so the plane has had to go home. It will come back. We came down by parachute. What has happened here?"

One of the men, the one who had first appeared on the ridge, answered. "We heard the plane, but naturally supposing that it was Russian or Chinese, we hid in the caves. My name is Ritzen. I am Swedish but I have spent a lot of time in the U.S.A. My good friend here is Father Dubron of France."

The Frenchman bowed.

Ginger was looking at the Swede. He was a tall, fair, blue-eyed fellow, somewhere in the middle twenties. He had a frank open expression and Ginger liked him on sight. He spoke English with a curious accent.

"We're mighty glad to see you," continued the Swede. "There's no food left and we reckoned we were about finished."

"We've brought plenty of food with us, enough for a larger party than this; also some medical and toilet things," said Algy. "We thought you'd be needing them. I suggest we fetch the food in right away. When you've had something to eat, you can tell us what

happened here. I can see there's been trouble. Are you expecting any more visitors?"

"I'm afraid I can't answer that," replied Ritzen.

All the men went out to bring in the containers, and an hour later, the Swede, who had been chosen as spokesman, was telling his story.

"All was well here until about ten days ago," he began. "Of course, we were always short of food, but those of us who have been out here for years have got accustomed to living on frugal rations. Our noble friend, Abbot Ching-fu, shared everything with us. Naturally we were always prepared for trouble, but not the way it came, which was really bad luck. The Abbot had friends in Tunhwang who promised to keep an ear open and let us know if our presence here was ever suspected. He would send us warning, which would give us time to hide in the secret caves. We couldn't stay in the caves all the time. As I

have said, we were always short of food, so we did what we could in the garden to produce more. These good ladies helped. They mended our clothes and did the cooking. I don't think any of us ever really expected to get away. No one thought Feng-tao would get through, or even if he did, that help would be sent to a place like this."

"Were you the man who sent Feng-tao?" questioned Algy.

"No. That was Dr. McDougall. He and Feng-tao had known each other for years."

"I see," murmured Algy. "Go on."

"We always had a man on the look-out," resumed Ritzen. "There he is." He pointed to the Chinese. "Kao-Ming's his name—Ming for short. He was assistant priest under the Abbot. He spent the day in the sun atop a hill watching all around for anyone coming this way. Ten days ago it was my turn, with Father Dubron, to go out in the desert and collect dry tamarisk sticks for the cooking-fire. That's how it happens that we're still here. The ladies were in the caves and the others were about the place doing their chores. Suddenly into the camp galloped a bunch of Kirghiz brigands. These men are nomads of the Mongolian-Tartar family, and incidentally the descendants of the famous Genghiz Khan. They're all rogues and robbers to a man, although to be fair, they've been driven to it. They are fierce people. Some of them wouldn't kowtow to the Russians when they seized the land with the result that the order went out to liquidate them. Some got away, and they've been wild men of the plains ever since. I must say they never did us any harm, not deliberately. Perhaps they knew we weren't worth robbing. There's been a gang of about twenty around this district for years. They came here once or twice. They'd do a lot of shouting, feed and water their horses, take what they could find and then gallop off again."

"We saw two of them in the desert," interposed Algy.

"They must have been two of those who escaped the massacre here," said Ritzen. "This is what happened. As I was saying, the gang arrived here, as usual demanding food and water for themselves and their horses. Ming saw them coming and rushed down to warn everybody and give the Abbot a chance to get what bit of rice and millet we had under cover. Coming down the way he did, Ming didn't see what was behind the Kirghiz. They didn't know, either. I wasn't there myself, but the ladies saw it all from the caves, so I'll leave one of them to carry on."

Miss Summers took up the story. "We were watching without being seen. The brigands had watered their horses at the stream and collected all the food they could find, and we were hoping they would soon go away when a big party of Chinese cavalry charged up and caught them, and everyone else, unprepared.

"When I say cavalry, I mean proper soldiers of the New Red Army. They were mostly young men and mad to use the weapons which the Russians have given them. They'll kill anybody for the pleasure of it, including their own people if they're in the mood. They opened fire at once. It was terrible. For half an hour the battle raged. Dead and wounded men lay about everywhere. Of course, our people took no part in this. When it started the Abbot simply retired into the guesthouse, and there the others of our party, who had been working in the garden, joined him. Some of the Kirghiz made their last stand there. That's how Mr. Carter was killed. He was hit by a bullet. Mr. Bates, an American, was so badly wounded that he was left for dead and died two days later. Of course, our people were seen—I mean the rest of those who were here—by the Chinese, who carried them away to captivity."

"How many prisoners were taken?" asked Algy.

"Five, including Abbot Ching-Fu. Originally we were eleven in our party. Mr. Greuze, a Swiss, died some time ago. I say died, but actually he was murdered. He died of tortures inflicted on him by an officer of the New Chinese Army named Colonel Ma Chang. He's nicknamed The Tiger. He's the big man at Tunhwang, and a greater villain never lived. Unhappily he's the type who so often gets on top in troubled times like these. Two of our people, as I told you, were killed in the battle, four were carried away with Ching-Fu, leaving four of us here."

"We heard the shooting from where we were gathering sticks," continued Ritzen. "We hurried back, but when we saw what was happening we could only watch helplessly from a distance. Ming was lucky, too. He managed to take refuge in the caves. When it was all over the Chinese soldiers dug a shallow grave in the sand and threw the dead into it. Their wounded they took away with them. Before they went they murdered in cold blood any Kirghiz who showed signs of life and simply left them where they fell. We gave them a decent funeral which, as you can imagine, took us some time; but it had to be done. Mr. Carter and Mr. Bates we buried together under the willows over there. Of course, to those who have lived here, there's nothing remarkable about this sort of thing. This part of the world has long

been a melting-pot for a dozen different races and religions. All hate each other. Can you wonder that life is held cheaply, and death by violence a thing so commonplace that no one bothers much about it."

"I suppose you don't know what has become of the people who were carried away?" asked Algy.

"Yes. A friend of the Abbot brought us word that they are in prison at Tunhwang, awaiting trial as enemy agents and collaborators. They may wait months, or years, for their trial—or the mockery of one."

"How frightful!" muttered Ginger, aghast.

"Do you think there's any chance of either the Kirghiz or the Chinese coming back?" enquired Algy.

The Swede looked doubtful. "It's hard to say. There couldn't have been many Kirghiz left, so it's unlikely that that particular band will come back unless they are desperate for water. I can only hope that the Chinese troops, supposing that they have cleared the place up, won't come back either. One cannot be sure. The whole country is seething. Our fear has been that under torture, which is still practised here, our own people might be compelled to confess that there are more Europeans at Nan-hu. We were considering asking Ming to go into the town to keep in touch with events there. Anything that happens, or is intended, will soon be known in the *bazar*."

Algy drew a deep breath. "All right," he said thoughtfully. "We shall have to wait a week for the plane to come back, but there is plenty we can do. I think the first thing is to post a sentry to make sure that we're not surprised. Everyone must take the greatest not to leave anything lying about, cans or carton for instance, to show that someone is here or that stores have been brought here. The most important thing of all is to get a piece of ground prepared so that the airplane can land. We expected more help than is now available, so the sooner we make a start on that the better."

"What about the people who have been taken prisoner?" asked Ginger.

Algy shook his head. "I'm afraid their position is pretty hopeless." He looked at Ritzen. "Can you speak Chinese?"

"Sure, and two or three of the other languages that are spoken here. The first thing a missionary here must do is learn the languages, otherwise he might as well be dumb."

"I was thinking you might discuss matters with Feng and Ming and find out if they can suggest anything. It goes against the grain to abandon the prisoners to their fate, but the question how far we should be justified in risking the lives of everyone here in an attempt to save them is one that will need a lot of thought. Meanwhile, Mr. Ritzen, you might ask Ming to continue his duty as sentry. The ladies, if they will, can get the food sorted and put in a safe place. I am anxious to make a thorough examination of the ground we shall have to clear in order that the plane can get down. That's the important thing."

"I understand," answered Ritzen. "I suggest we start right away."

And so the work began.

CHAPTER V AN AFTERNOON TO REMEMBER

FOR three days all went well, and had it not been for the fate of those who had been taken prisoner everyone might have anticipated cheerfully a successful outcome to the operation.

Algy and Ginger now knew every inch of the oasis, such as it was. It consisted of no more than a narrow strip of reasonably fertile ground about five hundred yards long, following the course of a trickle of water which had been flattered by being called a river. But to be fair, at some period, or perhaps in the rainy season, judging from the depth of the bed it had cut it must have carried a fair amount of water. The reason why this particular piece of ground had been spared the fate of the surrounding country presented no problem. The sandstone cliff that rose almost straight up from the stream on the opposite bank had acted not only as protection against the extremes of weather from which the whole country suffered, but had served as a barrier against the advance of the desert sand travelling on the face of the prevailing wind. This was proved by the way the sand had conquered at each end of the cliff, which was roughly the same length as the oasis. The cliff rose to its maximum height in the middle. The oasis reached its maximum width immediately opposite. Where the cliff began to fall away at each end so the oasis narrowed proportionately, proving that the oasis was dependent on the cliff for its existence. The whole length of the cliff was honeycombed with caves. Those in the middle were reached from a ledge to which a narrow, steep path gave access. The

cliff itself was natural. Everything else was artificial.

The same might be said of the oasis, which had obviously profited by hundreds of years of labour by successive priests, the guardians of the Buddhist shrine. These men had planted such trees as the oasis could boast—a line of dwarf poplars and groups of shrubby willows a little to one side of the guest house, which, naturally, had been built at the widest point. There was a small orchard of mixed fruit trees, apples, plums and apricots, which yielded fruit of indifferent quality. For the rest, a certain amount of earth, fortified by successive ages of waste vegetable matter, had been brought under cultivation to produce melons, millet, peas, a little rice and some rhubarb, the latter for medicinal purposes. The rest of the ground was given over to a tall bushy grass which was used for a variety of purposes, from making baskets and mats, for winnowing grain, and, tied in a bunch at the end of a stick, as a broom.

The site of the proposed landing-strip had been surveyed and most of the more serious obstacles had already been removed; that is to say, they had been dragged to one side where they could do no harm. In spite of the fact that fewer hands than had been expected were available for the work, it had proved less difficult than Biggles had supposed. Of course, in view of what depended on the completion of the task, everyone had worked hard, often by moonlight, taking their rest during the fierce heat of midday.

The only feature of interest in the desert—indeed, it was the only feature—was the ruins of an ancient building which might have been a shrine, or possibly a watchtower. It was quite small. There was a crypt, or chamber, underneath it. There was nothing there of interest. The place was about a mile from the end of the oasis. Algy and Ginger had walked out to look at it, but having decided that it could serve no useful purpose thought no more about it.

Ming had volunteered to go to Tunhwang for news of the prisoners. Being a man of the country, and a priest, there was no great risk in this. Feng undertook to keep watch whenever the workers were on the job. For the rest, the whole party lived in the caves. These formed such a labyrinth that neither Algy nor Ginger ever saw a half of them. They agreed that they were wonderful, for every inch of the walls and ceilings had been painted either with formal oriental designs or scenes depicting the life of Buddha, statues of whom occurred everywhere. Ginger was appalled by the amount of labour all this had demanded, and the ages of time it must have occupied; but he was not enthusiastic. Neither, for that matter, was Algy. They had too much on

their minds for an appreciation of art. As far as they were concerned the caves provided an exceptionally good retreat, for which reason, no doubt, it had been chosen by friendly Chinese as the best place to hide the refugees.

All remained quiet so work went along smoothly, and there was every reason to hope that this satisfactory state of affairs would persist until Biggles returned. Upon him, Algy had decided, would fall the onus of saying what was to be done about the prisoners. Had it not been for this one factor, which naturally cast a gloom on the missionaries still at the caves, all would have been as near perfect as the strange circumstances would allow.

The only visitor had been a travelling Llama, in his red robe. Warning of his approach was given by Feng, so everyone retired to the caves. The man stayed only a short time to rest and then proceeded on his way to Lhasa, having seen nothing of what was going on. No trouble was apprehended from this source.

It was on the fourth day that their hope of a peaceful sojourn was rudely shattered. It was late in the afternoon, at an hour when it was customary for everyone to knock off work and return to the shade of the caves for a cup of tea provided by the ladies. Ginger had, in fact, already departed, saying that he was going a little way down the stream for a bath—there was not enough water in the stream for actual bathing. The rest were walking together towards the caves when Feng came tearing down the hill to announce the approach of four Chinese soldiers, on the way, he supposed, to water their horses. This is

what they had always feared, and the prime reason for a sentry always being on duty; for sweet water in the desert is a magnet seldom resisted.

The result of Feng's explosive news was to start a rush for the caves, which were reached in some disorder but in good time. Algy had not forgotten Ginger, and arriving on the ledge that gave access to the caves, which provided a good view of the stream below, he looked wildly for him, hoping to see him returning from his ablutions. He was not in sight, which meant that he was still behind a small clump of willows, about two hundred yards distant, a place decided on for the purpose for which Ginger was now using it.

Algy nearly panicked. He was at a loss to know what to do. There seemed nothing he could do. A shout would be heard by the soldiers

who, as Feng's frenzied signals indicated, were now entering the oasis from the far end. At the finish Algy did nothing, for to expose himself would serve no useful purpose. Indeed, it would obviously do more harm than good. So he could only pray that Ginger would remain where he was, or that he would see or hear the horsemen before they saw him.

A jingle of accoutrements warned Algy that it was time he himself was out of sight. The others were already in the caves. He stepped back into the deep shade of the nearest one and lay flat in a position from which he could watch events with little or no risk of discovery. A touch on the arm made him turn and he saw Ritzen lying beside him.

The four soldiers, apparently out on a routine patrol or from their casual behaviour out simply to enjoy themselves, appeared beside the little brook. One, a little frog-faced man with a lot of gold braid about him, was evidently an officer.

"Ma Chang!—the Tiger," breathed Ritzen in Algy's ear.

The soldiers went on to the guest-house, dismounted and released their horses which made straight for the water. The men threw themselves down and lit cigarettes. It was clear that they suspected nothing. They had no reason to, for, as was later revealed, these were four of the men who had surprised the Kirghiz and pretty well wiped them out. From their manner they were in no hurry. In fact, it looked as though they might stay some time; which threw Algy into a perspiration of suspense, for at any moment now Ginger would appear for his cup of tea, and would have to pass the spot where the men were seated in order to reach the narrow track leading up to the caves.

Five minutes passed. The men did not move their position. What was worse, they were now looking up at the caves, talking in a way that suggested that they might be contemplating going up to them. In the ordinary course of events this would not have mattered very much because those already there, having been shown the secret recesses by Abbot Ching-Fu, would have retreated farther than the troops were likely to venture.

However, this did not happen, although it is likely that it was prevented by the one thing Algy feared most. From behind the willows now appeared Ginger, whistling and gaily swinging a towel. The soldiers heard him. After a quick glance at each other, they sprang to their feet and dashed for the cover of the guest-house. Ginger came

straight on, and was not more than a dozen yards from the ambush when he saw the horses, which by this time had left the stream and were grazing in the shade of the poplars.

The whistle died on his lips and he pulled up dead. Before he could have recovered from the shock of this discovery the soldiers had dashed out and were covering him with their carbines. Ma Chang tucked his riding switch under his arm and produced a revolver. With a sinking heart Algy remembered that this was the ruffian who had tortured the Swiss missionary to death.

He drew a deep breath and felt for his automatic. What the troops intended doing was not yet clear. It seemed probable that, as the thing had happened suddenly, they themselves did not know. The prisoner was helpless in their hands so they would naturally suppose there was no urgency about anything. What Algy did know was, he was not prepared to stay on the ledge, doing nothing while Ginger was murdered or carried off. It would, he knew, be one or the other. He half raised his pistol. Then the awful thought struck him that if he revealed himself he would betray the rest the party. Many lives against one. The terrible decision with which he was now faced brought beads of sweat to his forehead. He hesitated. Before doing anything he would see what the soldiers intended to do. Tense gun in hand, he waited.

The three troopers were now talking excitedly, clearly discussing the situation. The officer, who seemed slightly amused, regarded the prisoner critically. Ginger, on his part, did nothing, but simply stood looking at the Chinese with unconcern, apparently prepared to submit to any decision that they might make rather than jeopardise the rest of the party. He could neither ask nor answer questions. Once, when Ma Chang snapped a question at him, he merely shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

So far it seemed that it had not occurred to any of the soldiers that their prisoner might not be alone. Now one of them said something, with the result that they all looked about them, as if seeking the answer to this question. They did not go far and soon desisted. The officer ran his eyes along the face of the cliff, but apparently satisfied that there was no one there, turned again to his prisoner, and said something in a harsh voice. The words reached the watchers clearly.

"He's telling him to prostrate himself before an officer," whispered Ritzen.

Ginger, not knowing what was being said, did not move; whereupon Ma Chang took a quick pace forward and slashed at him with his switch. Ginger caught the blow with his arm. Before he could recover two of the soldiers had seized him and flung him face downwards on the ground. The officer stepped forward and spurned him with his foot. At a word of command Ginger was dragged to a kneeling position. Ma Chang then threw aside his switch, flourished his revolver, and stepping behind his prisoner, pointed the muzzle at his head.

This was more than Algy could stand. He moved, and he moved quickly. His pistol came up. He took quick aim and fired.

At the crack of the shot for a second all movement was suspended. Then four yellow faces jerked round to stare in the direction whence it came. Whether they saw him or not, Algy did not know. He thought not.

Furious with himself at having missed, and feeling that he had made matters worse, he was about to fire again when the silence was shattered by a ragged volley of gun shots, and with them the whole scene sprang to life and movement.

Two of the Chinese dropped dead on the spot. The other two dashed for the horses. More shots rang out. One man stumbled and fell, but half rose, turning, to

fire at a man who was pursuing him. This man fired point blank at the soldier, and then he, too, went down on his knees. The one survivor, Ma Chang, reached the horses, flung himself into the saddle of the nearest, and slamming home his spurs, bending low, galloped away, hotly pursued by two of the attacking force.

Ginger, who had thrown himself flat at the first volley, lay still, although his head was raised as if he were trying to see what was happening.

Algy's emotions, as he gazed on this picture of savagery from above, can be better imagined than described. Although his brain was whirling at the suddenness of it all, he saw plainly enough what had happened, for the newcomers—he could count five—were Kirghiz. Whether they had come to the oasis for water, or whether they had stalked the soldiers in the same way that, a few days earlier, the soldiers had stalked them, he did not know. He never did know. One thing was certain. The brigands had taken a smashing revenge.

There were more shots some way off; then those who had pursued Ma Chang returned and the outlaws stood laughing and talking together as if delighted at the success of their onset—as, indeed, they had every reason to be. The fifth man, who was wounded, crawled to his companions and joined in the congratulations.

Presently they all fell silent and turned to look curiously at Ginger who now rose to his feet, at the same time making a movement with his hand as much as to say thank-you. He showed them the crimson weal on his arm and made a grimace to show that it was painful.

Algy had not moved. He was still uncertain about what he should do, for at first sight it seemed that Ginger might not have escaped his fate after all, but merely postponed it. The bandits gathered round him as if not knowing what to make of him. Then one began talking earnestly. Algy thought he recognised him for one of the two riders who had told Feng the way to Nan-hu. Was *that* what had brought them to the oasis, he wondered. He thought it likely, but he was never able to confirm it. Not that it mattered.

Algy had his problem solved for him by Ritzen, who had remained motionless during these dramatic events. "The men below are Kirghiz," said the Swede.

"I can see that," answered Algy.

"They hate their present overlords more than anyone."

"How can that help us?"

"Well, if they think we are against the people who are persecuting them they might regard us as allies, which in a way we are. We're all fugitives from the same threat of destruction, I guess. One of them has been wounded. He will be helpless to do anything about that himself, so I shall offer to go down to dress his wound."

Algy looked startled. This would be taking the bull by the horns with a vengeance, he thought. "Can you speak their language?"

"Certainly. They speak Turki. Let us go down. I will tell the others to remain where they are and hide in a secret cave if things go wrong."

A minute later the minister walked out on the ledge, and holding his hands above his head to show that he was unarmed, called something.

Instantly five faces spun round, rifles jumping ready to shoot.

Followed by Algy, in dead silence the Swede walked down the narrow path to ground level and then on to where the outlaws stood waiting.

Neither Algy nor Ginger, who had joined him, holding his arm tenderly, could follow the conversation that ensued. It went on for some time, and all they could do was watch the faces of the speakers in the hope of getting a glimpse of how things were going. They did not learn much although they could see there was a certain, amount of argument on both sides. At the finish, Ritzen turned to Algy and said: "I think it will be all right. They

have promised not to harm us if we will give them some food. They have none and they say they are hungry, which I guess is true. They want money, of course, but I've told them we haven't any. Knowing that missionaries don't lie, they believe that, but they're disappointed, because money in this part of the world where corruption is rife, could help them in many ways. They say they're going to stay here the night. Their horses must rest. I can't shake them from that. I'm going to dress the wound of the fellow who's been hurt, then we'll discuss the position more fully. I've asked them to bury the dead soldiers out of sight somewhere."

"I'll fetch our medicine chest;" offered Ginger.

While he was getting it the wounded man, who had been struck in the groin, was carried by his companions into the guest-house. Leaving him there they caught the loose horse, tethered the soldiers' horses with their own, and then with scant ceremony dragged the bodies some distance away.

Algy sat and watched these proceedings with mixed feelings. Truly, he pondered, war makes strange bed-fellows. To say that he was happy at this state of affairs would of course be far from true; but he comforted himself with the thought that things might have been worse—a lot worse.

He and Ginger fetched water and Ritzen got to work on the damaged Kirghiz; a far from pleasant job, for the man's clothes were stiff with dirt and he had obviously never had a bath in his life. However, the man bore the pain without a tremor—if he was capable of feeling pain—when the bullet was extracted. The wound bandaged, he was made comfortable, and that was that. The man's friends stood outside, talking.

They raised no objection when Algy, Ginger and Ritzen returned to

the caves. A fair quantity of food and some cigarettes were taken from the store and carried down by the minister, who stood for some time talking before he returned.

Algy looked at the weal on Ginger's arm.

"I'll remember that swine," vowed Ginger.

"For a little while I thought it was going to be worse," Algy told him.

When the Swede came back Algy looked at him and said: "This is a nice business. What are we going to do about it?"

"There's nothing we can do," answered Ritzen.

"Did you ask them what happened to Ma Chang?"

"He got away. He had the fastest horse."

"That's a pity," said Algy. "He'll report what happened and come back with reinforcements. Don't those fellows below realise that?"

"Perfectly well. I've pointed it out to them." "What did they say?"

"They merely said that if more soldiers came they'd fight them. They would, too. I know these people. They're always fighting, for which reason the sort of thing you're seen here this afternoon goes on all the time. To them it's a mere trifle."

"But if they stay here, we can't," declared Algy.

"We shall have to stay," asserted Ritzen. "We shall have to stay for the simple reason that there's nowhere else to go—that is, not within a day's march. And what about your friend with the plane? You say he'll come back here. For that reason alone you couldn't leave."

"But look here," put in Ginger. "If the Chinese send more troops they'll fight the Kirghiz. Having mopped them up, they may go away. They won't necessarily know anything about us."

"Ma Chang isn't likely to forget that he saw you," said Algy. "The whole place will be searched." "If the brigands have left by the time the troops get here, maybe they won't trouble about that straight away," put in Ritzen optimistically. "They'll be too mad to get after the Kirghiz. That, I think, is the best we can hope for."

Algy nodded. "At least we seem to have nothing to fear from the

bandits, which is something."

"I've said we were hiding from the soldiers. They could understand that."

"How long is that wounded man likely to be laid up?"

"He's not seriously hurt. He could move at any time if the need arose. These fellows are more like animals than men. Wounds mean nothing. They're accepted as all part of the day's work."

Algy shrugged. "Well, I suppose we shall just have to put up with it."

Father Dubron had joined them. His English was not very good, but he agreed.

By the time the discussion was adjourned for the evening meal darkness was falling.

Ritzen examined Ginger's arm. Ginger made light of it, but it had been a vicious blow, and they all knew that while the scarlet weal was not exactly a wound it must be painful.

"I'll give him that back, with interest, if ever I get the chance," said Ginger.

"Ma Chang has a notorious reputation for using that whip," Ritzen told him.

"I'll remember it," returned Algy grimly.

They had just finished the meal and were tidying up when Ming walked in. Ritzen spoke to him, and Ming replied, whereupon the minister turned back to Algy with an expression on his face that prepared him for serious tidings.

"The prisoners are to be moved from the prison at Tunhwang," translated Ritzen.

"To where?" asked Algy tersely.

"At first to Ansi. That's a long way away from the Red Highway. From there they will probably go on to Siberia. Ming got the news from the baker who serves the prison."

"When are they going?" asked Algy.

"To-night. That is to say, they will start soon after midnight, which is the usual time for starting a journey in this part of the world. By doing that the first stage is reached soon after dawn. A stage is the distance from one water-hole to the next." For a minute nobody spoke. Then Algy said, wearily: "We just needed that to round of a really jolly afternoon."

CHAPTER VI GINGER WINS AN ARGUMENT

IT was some minutes before anyone spoke again. Consternation or dejection was written on every face round the little oil lamp that had been lighted. It seemed to be taken for granted that nothing could be done, that any hope of saving the prisoners could now be abandoned.

As for Ginger, he wished fervently that Biggles was there. He would at least have attempted something. He had a saying, there's always a way if you can find it. Even in this desperate emergency he would not have rested until he had found a way, Ginger was sure. He had another axiom. The stickiest operation sometimes turns out to be the easiest. Well, this one looked sticky enough in all conscience.

From the drawn faces of the people around him it was plain that they had taken the depressing news to heart. That was only to be expected. They had known the missing men for years. Sometimes they had travelled together far out into the unknown, sharing the perils as they worked in the same good cause.

At last Ginger looked up at Ritzen. "How far are we from Tunhwang?"

"The best part of twenty miles, as near as I could judge."

"And Ansi is over a hundred miles farther on?"

"That's right. Once our friends get there, they will never be seen again. Others we know have travelled that same dreadful route. Why do you ask?"

"I was just thinking," answered Ginger vaguely.

"I was probably thinking on the same lines," said Algy.

"You mean, you think we ought to do something?"

"Yes."

"The trouble is there isn't much time. If we decided on anything it would have to be done to-night.

Ritzen stepped in. "My dear young man, you can dismiss the matter from your mind," he said, almost severely. "The thing is hopeless."

"I still have to be convinced that it is utterly hopeless," returned Ginger quietly. "And I shall take a bit of convincing," he added. "If my chief was here, he'd tell you that nothing is ever hopeless."

Ritzen stared at him. "Surely you're not thinking of going to Tunhwang!"

"I am. "

"But that's ridiculous," protested Miss Summers, and even Father Dubron looked at Ginger sadly, as if doubting his sanity.

Said Ritzen. "You don't know the way. You can't speak the language. You couldn't walk— "

"I wasn't thinking of walking," interposed Ginger, a trifle impatiently.

"How else could you get there?"

"By riding a horse."

"What horse?"

"There are several down below."

"The Kirghiz horses?"

"There are eight horses. I don't care who they belong to."

"The Kirghiz said their horses were worn out."

"I know they did, but I don't believe it. They didn't strike me as looking particularly tired. That was simply an excuse to stay here."

"They wouldn't need an excuse for that."

"I doubt if even you know what was in their minds."

Ritzen shook his head sadly.

"Suppose someone tries to be a bit encouraging for a change," suggested Ginger, almost plaintively. "I shall not deliberately commit suicide, you may be sure. So far I'm just turning over the possibilities, that's all."

Ritzen shook his head again. "You don't know the way, and you have no idea of what this desert country is like."

"I've an idea," countered Ginger. "Ming must know the way. No doubt Feng does too. One might act as guide."

"And having got there what would you do?"

"I haven't thought as far as that yet," admitted Ginger. "Would you mind asking Ming if he knows how the prisoners will travel and what is likely to be the size of their escort?"

Ritzen put the question, and turning back to Ginger gave the answer. "He says he has no definite information, but it is almost certain they will go in one of the covered carts used in this region. There is, in fact, no other form of wheeled transport here, for the simple

reason there is no proper road. These awful rutted tracks would break the springs of any ordinary vehicle. The escort will probably consist of anything up to half a dozen soldiers walking beside the cart. Four is the usual number when there are only a few prisoners. Actually, even that is only for the look of the thing, for there is no likelihood of an attempt to escape. The prisoners, having no food and nowhere to go, would be recaptured at once—unless they wandered out into the desert and starved to death."

Ginger looked at Algy. "That doesn't sound too bad to me."

"The escort will consist of soldiers, and they will of course be armed," Ritzen pointed out.

"So shall we," averred Ginger. Then he had his brainwave. "What about the Kirghiz!"

"What about them?"

"We might employ them."

"Employ them! Those desperate men!"

Ginger smiled. "We can be pretty tough ourselves at times."

"I can assure you that nobody has ever succeeded in employing Kirghiz outlaws."

"That's probably because they were expected to work for nothing."

"And what were you thinking of offering them ? "

"The two things which, according to you, they like most.' Fighting and money."

"But we have no money." "It's available, should we need it. The British Government has never jibbed at paying for service, and as all the world knows it has never failed to pay its debts. If we got safely home, I'd undertake to fly back here and drop a bag of money—whatever we promised."

Everyone now began to take an interest and a faint atmosphere of hope became perceptible.

Algy looked at Ginger. "You know, I think you've got something there."

"What do you use for money in this part of the world?" Ginger put the question to Ritzen.

"There are several currencies, both coin and paper money," was the reply. "But the money that is accepted by everyone is in the form of lumps of silver called *taels*. A *tael* is worth a bit under two shillings."

Algy did some mental arithmetic. "Could we say that a thousand tael would be roughly about a hundred pounds?"

"Roughly, yes."

"Would that interest the Kirghiz do you think?"

Ritzen smiled bleakly. "I doubt if they've ever seen so much money. Such a sum would be a fortune here, where men work all the hours of daylight for around a penny a day."

"All right. Then let's get weaving," suggested Ginger. "How about you having a word with the bandits and finding out how the idea of being millionaires appeals to them?"

Miss Treves spoke. "Are you thinking of attacking the cart?"

"Put it this way," answered Ginger. "I'm trying to think of some way of

saving innocent people from a miserable death. In my view, any means justifies that end."

"C'est vrai," declared the French member of the party, apparently a realist like most of his countrymen. "I dislike bloodshed," said Miss Summers.

"So do I—particularly when it's likely to be my own," returned Ginger.

"I hold that it's unpardonable."

"It's also unpardonable of these godless communists to carry off our friends for no other reason than sheer hate," declared Ginger warmly. "Let's waste no more time arguing about that, please."

"I'll go and speak to the Kirghiz," said Ritzen, getting up and going into the darkness.

"If they won't come themselves, ask them if we can have the spare horses," requested Algy. "Tell them they must make up their minds quickly or it'll be too late."

For all the arguments he had put forward Ginger knew in his heart that this was the craziest scheme which they had ever committed themselves. The whole project had been a wild one from the outset, but it was now, he felt, fast approaching the fantastic. But as he had said in an aside to Algy, he wouldn't have slept had they done nothing. Gnawing at his conscience would have been the thought of the wretched people in the cart getting ever farther away from any hope of deliverance. With or without the co-operation of the bandits he did not hold any high hopes of success. But anything was better than sitting doing nothing at all.

Ritzen came back. "They will go," he announced briefly.

"Capital!" cried Algy.

"The thousand taels did the trick."

"Cheap at the price."

"They have a doubt. It is that the prisoners, fearing them more than their captors, will not leave the cart. For good faith they want one of us to go with them."

"I had every intention of going," declared Ginger.

"No, I'll go," stated Algy.

"Not likely," answered Ginger. "You've plenty on your plate here. It was my scheme. I'm the one to go. That's settled."

Ritzen joined in again. "They want us to keep their wounded comrade in the caves and look after him until they get back. They're afraid that the Tiger may come back with more soldiers. If they found a Kirghiz here they would at once put him to death without mercy."

"That's fair enough," agreed Algy. "As a matter of fact I was thinking that myself."

"I said that if any of us got home we would see that a bag of money was dropped in the sand where the stones have been cleared," said Ritzen. "There was a question about the horses," he continued. "There are four white prisoners and the Abbot, making five in all. There are four Kirghiz. They have five horses plus the three captured from the troops, making eight. That means only three horses available for the five prisoners."

"I doubt if the Abbot would ride," said Miss Summers. "He's very old."

"We'd manage him somehow," declared Ginger. "How many horses will there be drawing the cart?"

"Usually two."

"We'll borrow those if necessary," said Ginger, brushing the difficulty aside in his impatience.

"You will all come back here if the plan succeeds?" queried Ritzen.

"Of course, to be ready for the plane when it comes. But time is precious. If our wild and woolly allies are ready, let's get off."

That ended all argument.

The only preparations Ginger made were to put a couple of biscuits in his pocket with a flask of water, and throw on a loose Chinese robe which Feng produced from somewhere. This, it was thought, would serve both as camouflage and as an extra garment in the cold night air.

And just how cold it could be Ginger was soon to learn.

IN twenty minutes the rescue party was on its way, winding through a seemingly endless succession of valleys and defiles so that it was only by checking on the stars that Ginger could keep any sense of direction. At first the pace was a brisk walk, but as soon as the moon rose the Kirghiz broke into a gentle canter which, as they seemed to have no difficulty in keeping it up, Ginger took to be their normal speed. The horses were small and rough, but wiry-looking beasts.

How the bandits found their way through the maze of dead-looking hills that all looked alike was to Ginger a mystery, even though he took into account the fact that they had been born to such country and knew no other. There was no track, or a semblance of one, but they appeared never to be in doubt. He could only suppose that the serrated skylines served as signposts. They travelled in silence. Not once did they speak. Even the horses, three of which were being led, seemed to know, perhaps from training, that silence in the silent desert is the golden rule, and in some miraculous way they seldom kicked a stone.

In such bizarre conditions it is not surprising that Ginger lost all sense of reality. He found it hard to believe that this was really happening. It was all too preposterous. As a schoolboy he had read the usual stories about brigands. He knew the old rhyme about

the brigands sitting round their camp fire. Now, here he was, riding with a band of them across the middle of Asia. They were the real thing too. They had already demonstrated that plainly enough. No, it couldn't be happening. Presently he would wake up.

Then he smiled foolishly to himself at the absurd thought of what Biggles would think if he could see him. He lost all count of time. In some strange way such man-made sections of it as hours and minutes seemed no longer to have meaning. Here, the sun, the moon and the stars, the dawn, the dusk and the seasons, were the only measurements that mattered.

Still the Kirghiz pressed on without a spoken word, without a pause, with hardly a glance to left or right, clearly with no more doubts about their way than if they had been on a broad highroad. To Ginger, each inky gorge, each brooding valley, each gap through the everlasting dunes, was exactly like the last. Ritzen had been right in

one respect. Alone in such nightmare country he would have become hopelessly lost. No wonder Feng had called it the Black Gobi. No wonder, according to him, it was peopled by demons and monsters who lured :foolish travellers to their doom.

After what seemed an eternity it was the numbing cold that dispelled the illusion of a dream. There was no doubt whatever about the cold. Without the sun to warm it the thin air was perishing. The Kirghiz now began to advance more cautiously.

Before showing themselves on a skyline one would dismount, creep forward and survey the ground ahead. Ginger supposed that either they were nearing a caravan trail or approaching their destination. During one such halt he saw lying on the ground beside him an enormous pair of curved horns, and recognised them as coming from the head of the great desert sheep called *Ovis poli*. From the way the bones had been scattered it looked as if some beast had pulled the animal down and devoured it. Instinctively his eyes wandered to the bare, wrinkled hills around him. It was a dismal, terrifying country, he mused. What it was like in the winter, when storms and ice and snow swept down from the north, was something best left to the imagination. He hoped he would not be there to see it.

The party moved on even more slowly. At long last it stopped. The Kirghiz dismounted. Ginger did the same, but not before he had gazed across a plain that now stretched away before them. He discerned a slender grey ribbon winding across it; the track, he supposed.

The halt had been made at a point where it fringed the hills. So this, he surmised, was the one trail that linked Tunhwang with Ansi. Never had he seen a path so sinister. There was something almost evil about the way it crept secretly out of the gloom to glide like a serpent across the plain and fade again in the dim, mysterious distances.

The Kirghiz continued to go about their business like men who knew exactly what they were doing, having done the same thing many times before—as no doubt they had. One man took all the horses and led them back into the valley from which they had emerged.

The others, after a signal to Ginger, went forward a little nearer to the track, where they vanished from sight like phantoms in a slight fold in the ground. Ginger found a similar place for himself, not without qualms, knowing, what was going to happen. It did not appear to be a particularly good place for an ambushade, but apparently, the bandits thought it was. It had this advantage It did not look suitable for the

part it was to play, and, for that very reason the escort would suspect nothing

They settled down to wait.

This, to Ginger, was the most nerve-testing phase of the enterprise.

The landscape, in all its stark sterility, was bathed in hard moonlight. The stars hung like beacons in the vast expanse of sky, the constellations following their everlasting course across the heavens. All was still. Ginger had known silences, but none like this. The hush was that of a world from which all life had departed. There was something so terrible about it that he was afraid the nervous pounding of his heart would be heard.

The cold was intense. He was glad of his robe.

How long he lay there without sound or movement he did not know, for, fearful in case the luminous dial might be seen from a distance, he had put his watch in an inside pocket. There was no need to know the time. He became stiff and cramped, but still he dared not break the awful spell that seemed to hold the desert in its grip. Again the unreality of it all took him by the throat so that he was conscious of his heavy breathing after the long ride. The suspense became torture. The Kirghiz might have been stones for all the signs of life they showed.

At last the deathly hush was broken by a sound, a sound which, although trivial in itself, said much, and demonstrated more clearly than any words the need for absolute silence. A pebble had rattled against another. How far away this had occurred was not easy to judge. Ginger's eyes focused in the direction whence it had come.

Presently from out of the darkness came something that moved, a shape that soon resolved itself into a covered cart with a man walking beside the two horses that pulled it. But it was not the one for which they were waiting, for it was coming from the wrong direction, travelling towards Tunhwang, not away from it. Soon came the creak of leather mingled with the soft thud of the carter's padded cotton slippers. The clumsy vehicle came on, drew level.

With strange thoughts in his head Ginger watched it go past. It was like the passing of a wraith; the man, whip in hand, leaned forward, staring ahead, the weary horses dragging a monstrous conveyance through a land of Fear. The carter never saw them, or suspected their presence. To Ginger it was a phantom shape in another world. He had

never seen the man before. He would never see him again. For this one instant in all eternity they had been close together, he reflected. Never again would they meet. It was a queer, solemn thought. In a vague sort of way he marvelled at the tangled chain of events that had resulted in the encounter.

Some time later he was brought back to earth by another sound, one that told him that the vigil was at an end, for this time it came from the right direction. He made it out, from its regularity, to be the creak of a wooden axle. Shortly afterwards the bulk of the cart disengaged itself from the gloom. But for one thing it might have been the same cart coming back. It had the same top-heavy roof of matting. The same sort of carter strode beside his horses. But for the creak it moved in the same uncanny silence. But now there were four more figures. They walked bunched together as if they, too, were under the spell of fear. Rifle barrels, carried at different angles, gleamed faintly in the moonlight.

Ginger waited, and as he waited and the cart drew nearer yard by yard, the suspense became so strained that he felt that if it were not soon broken he must cry out. When the end came, although he was prepared, so violent was it that his taut-strung nerves collapsed like snapping fiddle-strings.

With a throaty cry that was half-way between a yell and a snarl, the Kirghiz leaped from their lairs, like tigers.

Judging from what the sound did to him, Ginger could understand how the guards must have felt. The shock was too much. All dropped their rifles and ran, screaming, into the desert; as did the carter, without a glance behind to see what was happening.

Never was an ambush more successful. Actually, the Chinese guards hadn't a chance, and they must have known it. The Kirghiz pursued them into the desert. Only one shot was fired. What happened out in the darkness Ginger did not know. Preferring not to know, he didn't ask. He ran up to the back of the cart and cried: "Who's in there?"

A deep voice rich with Scottish accent answered: "Angus McDougall for one. Who the blazes are you?"

Ginger ignored the question. "If you want to go home jump out and make it snappy. I'm one of a party come to fetch you."

He heard a voice say: "Now I know that miracles do happen."

Then four figures came scrambling out of the cart to stand in the moonlight.

I take it you're all anxious to get home?" asked Ginger.

The replies, in the affirmative, came in voices dazed with incredulity.

"Are you all well enough to ride?" questioned Ginger. Again the answer was yes.

"Are ye by yourself, laddie?" asked the Scot, a big, broad-shouldered man.

"I have some Kirghiz with me," Ginger told him. "Kirghiz! Those thieving vagabonds!"

"That's as may be, but at the moment some of them at least are on our side," said Ginger. "I couldn't have done this raid alone. They'll be back in a minute. Where's Abbot Ching-fu?"

"He's not with us," answered the Scot. "He was released from prison this afternoon on the understanding that he did not leave Tunhwang. There was nothing more he could do for us. The reason why they let him go was because he's well known as a holy man, with many friends. The communist agents didn't want to start an uprising by holding him. It doesn't take long to start a revolution here, particularly when religion is involved."

"As we were short of horses perhaps it's as well," said Ginger, who was relieved to be free of the responsibility of having the old Abbot with them. "I'll tell you about myself when I get back," he went on. "We're still short of a horse so we'll have to take one of these from the cart."

The Kirghiz now returned from the desert and the position was explained to them by Dr. McDougall. They wasted no words. Silent and taciturn they soon had one of the horses from the shafts. They clicked their fingers and their own horses were brought forward. Everyone mounted and the party moved off, the Kirghiz leading.

The thing that amazed Ginger, as they retraced their steps through the lonely passes, was not so much the success of the operation as the simplicity with which it had all worked out. At the outset it had been a forlorn hope. In the event, nothing could have been easier,

apart from the physical discomfort and fatigue.

The facts that had contributed to the success of the operation were plain to see now, he pondered. They had not been so apparent when the plan was first broached. First, there was the country itself, and the fears always present in the minds of those who had to cross it. This had made the surprise attack doubly, effective. And last but not least there were the Kirghiz, and the terror which their appearance inspired. The behaviour of the escort was sufficient proof of that. Remembering the blood-curdling war cry, Ginger could understand the panic it produced.

The march continued. The horses were getting tired now. They began to stumble and it was necessary to ride them on a tight rein to prevent them from falling.

Even though there was good reason to fear the light of day, for he did not overlook the possibility of pursuit, Ginger was glad to see the first pale streak of the false dawn. He was deadly tired, tired of riding, tired of the silence, tired of the darkness and tired of the cold, which now, with the first stirring of the usual dawn-wind, was more intense than ever. The breeze, gentle though it was, might have come straight from the Pole. Two thoughts kept him going. One was the anticipation of the congratulations the rescue of the prisoners would bring, and the other, the knowledge that this was the dawn of the fifth day. Two more days, a mere forty- eight hours, and Biggles would be with them.

Soon came the daily miracle of sunrise. A shaft of rosy light, the first of the true dawn, shot upwards. Others followed, to paint the sky a living pink that turned swiftly to gold and then to turquoise. In the light of the newborn day the desert looked a different place. There was still some distance to go, but the wilderness had been shorn of its terrors. With hanging heads and heaving flanks the horses struggled on.

They shied when a figure topped a dune a little way in front and came on in giant strides down the sliding sand. There was a brief moment of confusion in which the Kirghiz prepared for action; but when the man was seen to be Ming they put up their rifles and stood waiting.

Panting like a man who has ran far and fast, Ming staggered up, babbling incoherently and waving his arms even before he reached them.

Alarm laid a cold hand on Ginger's heart, for he could see from the behaviour of the Kirghiz that the messenger had brought evil tidings. "What's he saying?" he asked Dr. McDougall, who was riding next to

him.

Urgency sharpened his voice.

"He says there are many soldiers at the oasis," answered the big Scot, calmly.

Ginger sagged in his saddle. "Now I call that just too bad," he said wearily.

It seemed that the information of the presence of soldiers was as much as the Kirghiz needed to know, for they did not wait for details. They held a conversation that lasted about ten seconds, and in this time evidently reached agreement. Without a word they turned their mounts, drove in their spurs and galloped off.

Ginger watched them go without emotion. They had served their purpose, and as far as he could see there was nothing more they could do.

Ming went on talking to Dr. McDougall, who translated. Actually, there was little more to tell. The soldiers had crept into the oasis just before dawn and he had been sent to warn them to keep clear.

"What's the best thing to do?" asked Ginger. "We can't stay out here in the open. Is there anywhere else we can go? You know the country better than I do."

The question was being debated when from somewhere not far away came the roar of an explosion. They felt the blast of it.

No one spoke. All eyes were turned in the direction of the oasis, above which a cloud of smoke was now rolling into the sky.

CHAPTER VIII NO REST FOR ALGY

AT the oasis Algy wore through a restless night. He had too much on his mind for easy sleep. Naturally, he was more than a little worried on Ginger's account. The dangers attending him on the rescue attempt became so magnified during the small hours that he almost convinced himself that he would be lucky ever to see Ginger again.

Another big worry was the fear that the Tiger would cause trouble.

Indeed, this seemed inevitable. He would be bound to report what had happened to the Governor of the district, who, unless he was a complete fool, would realise that something was going on at Nan-hu and take steps to find out what it was. Even if he suspected nothing more than its occupation by the outlaw Kirghiz he would not be likely to sit back and do nothing about it. The probability was that he would follow the normal procedure of dealing with it as a hornets' nest that had become an irritation and send a force to wipe it out.

Brooding on the matter Algy felt that the best he could hope for was that nothing would happen for the next two days, by which time Biggles should have returned and they would all have departed. Far from this hope being fulfilled, his fears were to

materialise to the widest extent.

Tired of wrestling with his problems in the stygian darkness of the cave, he got up, dressed quietly, and went to the entrance both to get a breath of fresh air and be in a better position to hear Ginger coming when his return became imminent.

He could hear nothing, and see very little, for the moon was now well down and the stars were just beginning to weaken in the sky. It was, in fact, the tail end of the darkest hour that comes before dawn. However, his watch told him that daylight was not far off, so although it was bitterly cold he settled down to wait.

So slowly as to be almost imperceptible the blackness gave way to the sombre grey that is the first promise of the rising sun. The silence was profound; and no doubt because that was so, a sound, when it came, appeared out of proportion to its cause. It was no more than a rustle. It seemed to come from somewhere below, either from the area of thick, sun-dried herbage that flourished near the guest-house, or the orchard just beyond.

As a matter of detail, Algy didn't pay much attention to it. It might have been a falling leaf. It might have been a bird—he had noticed some wagtails; or possibly a jerboa, the little desert jumping rat, the holes of which he had seen.

He had dismissed the matter from his mind when another sound brought him sharply to attention. This time it was definite. A twig had snapped. What had caused it to snap? Certainly not a bird or a rat. That something was moving below was no longer in doubt.

What or who was it? The light was now a little stronger, but it was

still no more than the pale, deceptive grey of the earliest glimmer of dawn. He stared, nerves tense, trying to force his eyes to probe the gloom.

For a minute he could see nothing. Everything was vague and indistinct. Then a movement, the first and only movement in a scene as lifeless as a picture, caught his eye and held it. Standing under a tree, so fully exposed that he marvelled that he hadn't seen him before, was a man. Light glinted dimly on metal. He made out the figure of a Chinese soldier.

Algy went rigid. His eyes never left the man. He saw him move, and move again, always with, infinite care and patience towards the guest-house. He made a signal. In the growing light a second soldier, then a third, became discernible, silent shadows in a shadowy world. Algy's heart sank. So the worst had happened after all.

He backed stealthily into the cave that was used by the male members of the party. The two women were some way farther back, in a part of the caves, that had been allocated to them. In the feeble light of a little oil lamp, he saw that everyone was asleep. Finger to lips, he laid a hand on Ritzen's arm. The sleeper awoke with a start, but he must have grasped that something was amiss for he whispered: "What is it?"

"More troops are here," answered Algy. "They're stealing up to the guest-house—expecting to catch the Kirghiz there, I suppose. Wake the others. Be careful. Better collect everything and move back into the secret part of the caves. I'll go back and watch what happens. There's just a chance that when the troops discover that the Kirghiz aren't there they'll go away."

"What about Ginger?" asked Ritzen. "He may be back at any time now."

Strange to relate, in the shock of discovering the troops Algy had momentarily forgotten Ginger. "We mustn't allow that to happen," he declared. He thought swiftly. "I'll tell you what. Wake Ming and Feng and ask Ming if he knows a way by which he can get out into the desert without going near the guest-house. He's lived here so he should know if that's possible. He must also know the direction from which the Kirghiz are most likely to return. Tell him to go out and intercept them. It isn't properly light yet so I think he ought to have a good chance of getting clear without being seen. Tell him that he must tell Ginger on no account to come back here."

"What had Ming better do with them if he does meet the party coming

back?"

"He'll have to work that out himself. I don't care what they do as long as they keep clear of the oasis."

"They won't be able to stay out in the desert," asserted Ritzen. "The soldiers may hang about here all day."

"All right. What about that old ruin? There's a crypt under the tower. They might go there. But they can work that out for themselves. The thing is to impress upon them that it would be fatal for them to try to get back to the caves. I mean, I'm thinking about the horses. The troops must have horses somewhere, too. If the beasts see or wind each other they're likely to whinny."

"I get it." Ritzen went over to the alcove where the two Chinese, with the wounded Kirghiz, were sleeping.

Father Dubron was already sitting up listening. There was a whispered conversation and Ritzen came back.

"Ming says he will go," he reported. "He knows a way through communicating caves to the far end of the oasis. He can get from there to the desert without being seen."

"That's fine," returned Algy. "You get everyone on the alert in case we have to move farther back. Take everything with you if you do go. I'll warn you if it's necessary. There's just a chance that it won't come to that. The troops may push off when they find the Kirghiz aren't here. I'll go and watch."

Algy returned to the mouth of the cave, worming his way for the last two or three yards.

During the few minutes of his absence the light had grown appreciably and he found he could now see everything fairly clearly. What he saw appalled him. There were at least a dozen soldiers. One was an officer. He recognised him without surprise. It was Ma Chang.

With Indian-like stealth they were slowly closing in on the guest-house from all directions. The one question that remained to be answered was, what would they do when they found the place empty? He looked about for the horses, but could not see them. They had apparently been left some way off in case they made a noise and betrayed the projected attack.

Slowly but with great deliberation the soldiers, holding their carbines at the ready, closed in on their proposed victims. Algy watched with morbid fascination as the distance closed. Ma Chang drew his sword and raised a whistle to his lips. The screech of it sliced the silence like a blade. With a wild yell the troops leapt for the open doorway.

Algy, knowing what was going to happen, thought he had never seen a more ridiculous anti-climax. Had his own peril not been so great he could have laughed at the mortification and amazement on the men's when they came out of the building, which they soon did, was the funniest thing he had seen for some time. Chang was obviously very angry and he made his pleasure known by shouting a string of orders.

In a half-hearted way the troops now began to explore the oasis, apparently still hoping to find either the bandits or their horses. The odd thought struck Algy that had the Kirghiz refused to help in the rescue of the prisoners they would by this time, without any shadow of doubt, be dead men. They, at any rate, would have no cause for complaint if the story of the attack ever reached their ears.

One by one the soldiers reassembled in front of the guest-house. Algy, of course, hoped that they would now depart. Indeed, he felt quite sure that they would, for as far as he could see they had no reason to stay. In this he was wrong, as with mounting alarm he was soon to learn.

The troops threw their carbines on the ground and sitting down beside them lit cigarettes. Ma C blew a series of short blasts on his whistle. So there were still more of them, thought Algy, who guessed what the signal meant. Surely they were not going to there? It began to look like it. He could have groaned with disappointment.

Two more soldiers now arrived on the scene leading loaded pack-horses. Their loads were taken off, some of the soldiers getting up and helping with what seemed unnecessary care for men who were notoriously careless. Several wooden boxes were placed gently on the long dry grass. The pack-horses were then led away.

Algy watched this strange performance with growing wonder. What were they going to do? What was in the boxes? Why did they handle them as if they contained eggs? He noticed on the boxes some writing, in Chinese script, which of course he could not read. He went in and fetched Ritzen, giving him an idea of what was going on.

The Swede returned with him to the entrance, and lying flat, studied

the boxes. "They contain dynamite," he announced. "At least, some of them do. Dynamite and detonators."

"Dynamite!" Algy's eyes went round and his body went limp when he realised what this implied.

Ritzen was still staring down. "Those round things are coils of fuse wire," he observed.

"For heaven's sake! This is frightful," breathed Algy.

"I imagine they're going to blow up the guest-house to prevent it from being used by the Kirghiz or anybody else," observed the Swede.

"You realise what might happen if they did that?" returned Algy. "An explosion of any size might cause some of the caves to collapse."

"I agree. I wouldn't care to stay in them."

An even more horrid thought occurred to Algy. "They might be going to blow up the caves as well, while they're at it. I know how orientals behave if they get their hands on explosives. They blow up everything reach. They adore fireworks—anything that will make a bang. They're quite likely to blow themselves up, but that wouldn't help us."

"What d'you suggest we do about it?" asked Ritzen.

"You're in charge. It's for you to decide."

"I think we must try to get out of the caves for a start."

Ritzen agreed.

"But we can't go and sit in the open desert" went on Algy. "Apart from anything else we should be fried by the sun when it gets up."

Again Ritzen agreed.

Algy thought for a moment. "The only place I know where there is any shade is in that crypt under the tower. It seems to be our only hope."

"Yes, I think so."

"Very well," went on Algy. "You get everybody along, through the caves to the end of the cliff. Take as much food as you can and some water. Whether you wait for me there, or go straight on to the ruin, I leave to you. That will depend of course on how far you find it

possible to get clear without the risk of being seen from the guest-house. Feng will know best about that. In any case I think he'd better slip out and see if he can see anything of Ginger."

Ritzen nodded. "I can't think of anything else. We'll leave it like this. You'll find us either at the limit of the caves or at the ruins. It will be one or the other."

"Okay," confirmed Algy, and resumed his position to watch what was happening below.

Ritzen crept away.

Down in the oasis the work was proceeding in the usual Eastern disorderly manner. The boxes were being unpacked. Grey bundles of dynamite sticks were being put down on the grass. Drums of fuse wire were being uncoiled. The men were still smoking cigarettes. Algy prayed that one of them might drop a spark either on the dynamite or on the dry grass, but this prayer was not answered. Whatever else happened it was now plain that there was going to be an explosion.

A box of dynamite was carried to the guest-house. A coil of wire was uncoiled to the same place. A man went inside, presumably to make the connection. Algy, of course, couldn't see inside the building. So the guest-house was to be demolished. That was certain. Algy hoped that would be all, but he feared not. The quantity of explosive was significant. Even more significant was the way Ma Chang stared up at the caves while he gave more orders. From this Algy could only think that the caves were to be blown up, too. Apart from what this would mean to him, personally, it shocked him to think that these young fools—for most of the soldiers were youngish men—were ready so casually to destroy the immense labour of their ancestors. It was an indication of how far insidious propaganda had smothered their religious principles.

There was now, it seemed, to be a respite. The soldiers broke off what they were doing to water their horses, which were afterwards taken to some place out of sight. They then retired some distance to the shade of the poplars, sat down together, took food of some sort from their haversacks and started to eat.

CHAPTER IX SHOCKS—IN THE PLURAL

In the interval of this unexpected but welcome delay Algy considered the situation from every angle. He did some fast thinking, and from it an idea emerged, an idea that at first appeared so impudent that he recoiled from it, telling himself that he was out of his mind. Would Biggles think so? he wondered. The answer was a definite no. Biggles had so often said that the more daring a scheme the more likely it was to come off.

The troops were a good hundred yards from their dump. They had left it unguarded. No sentry was posted anywhere. They had left their carbines lying about like day-old recruits without supervision. This conduct, thought Algy, was so lacking in common-sense, so opposed to reasonable military procedure, that advantage should be taken of it. The question was, how?

The dynamite had been spread about in the grass, this apparently being considered the safest place for it. Possibly it was, since a sudden jolt has been known to cause the treacherous stuff to explode. The grass was thick, and as dry as sun-parched dead grass can be, which is very dry indeed and more than slightly inflammable. With fire set to it, it would burn fast and furiously. One match would be enough to set it ablaze.

Algy surveyed the ground below him with great care. Everything would depend on being able to get down without being seen. He thought it could be done. The troops were laughing and talking as they wolfed their rations. They were not even looking about them, obviously being under the impression that they were alone on the oasis; which, admittedly, was understandable.

The narrow path leading down to the river was trodden deep from long use. Once at the stream there would be no lack of cover, for this, too, had dug a bed well down into the ground. One bend of the stream passed within a few yards of the grass that had given Algy his idea. He decided that getting down was a reasonable risk. But getting back presented a more difficult problem. It was obvious that once the grass was fired there would be a certain amount of smoke and this could hardly fail to attract attention. Once the alarm had been raised it would not be possible to move without being seen, for all eyes would then be turned that way.

The answer seemed to be, not to try to get back up the path, but retreat directly away from the fire, through the orchard to a point where the cliff came down to merge with the desert. Then, by doubling back well clear of the edge of the cliff, he could either hide

among the dunes or make his way straight to the ruined tower.

He resolved to make the attempt, for if it came off it would be a master-stroke, in that not only would the caves be saved but the troops would have no reason to stay. It also seemed unlikely that they would return to repeat the experiment. Ma Chang, knowing that his own inefficiency was to blame, would not report the failure of his mission. To save his face he might even pretend that he had done the job he had been sent to do. He would, remembering the cigarette smoking during the unpacking business, suppose the firing of the grass to be an accident. At least, that is what Algy hoped. A fire could easily have been started that way.

Oddly enough, it never occurred to him that anyone might be hurt, the reason for this being, perhaps, because there was no one near the dynamite. He could not imagine anyone being so foolish as to go near it once the grass was alight.

Without further delay he inched his way forward to the top of the path, and resisting the temptation to look at the troops, which would have meant exposing his head, he carried on down what proved to be an easy descent. The going was rough, of course, and the grit took some of the skin off his knees; but this was a minor discomfort compared with what was at stake.

He paused when he reached the stream. The voice of the soldiers still laughing and talking as though they were out on a picnic told him that all was well, and safe for him to proceed. He took the precaution of putting his box of matches between his teeth to prevent them from getting wet, and still in the prone position set off in the manner of a crocodile up the stream. There was no difficulty about this, for he was still out of sight, and nowhere was the water more than a few inches deep. The worst was over, he told himself. Whatever happened now he would set fire to the grass. Nothing could stop him.

The plan developed without a hitch. Reaching the bend in the brook which he had noted from above as the spot best suited to his purpose, he took a cautious peep. Not a soul was in sight. Breathing fast and trembling a little with excitement now that success was so near, he reached out, tore up some tufts of the driest grass on which he could lay his hands and twisted the stuff into a rough torch. To this he now put a match.

As soon as it was well alight he jumped up, dashed forward, and ran the entire length of the grass, putting fire to it at close intervals. He

was now in view of the troops should they look his way, but to his surprise, not to say relief, still no alarm was given.

He did not stop to upset this satisfactory state of affairs by pushing his luck too far, but ran straight on into the orchard. Only when he was in the deep shade of the trees did he pull up for a moment to look back. He could have shouted with exultation when he saw that the fires which he had started had met and a wall of flame was moving briskly, with a cheerful crackle, in the right direction.

Wasting no time in self-congratulations that might turn out to be premature he ran on, ducking under the trees, to the end of the cliff. His luck held and he reached it without seeing a soul. But he noticed the horses picketed to a rope strung between two trees. He was relieved to note that they were too far away to be affected by the explosion. For a moment he toyed with the idea of turning them loose, but decided against it, a resolve that was supported by a wild yell from the area he had just left.

Turning the end of the cliff he held on for a little way until, seeing an opening in the rocks, he crept into it to look at what was happening below. By this time there was a good deal of noise. It sounded as if the soldiers were all shouting at once, as indeed they were, and he did not have to look far for the reason.

What he saw exceeded his hopes and filled him with a fierce satisfaction. Most of the grass was now well and truly alight. Sparks were flying high, and these, falling around, had fired the grass in many places. These spread at a speed beyond his most optimistic hopes. There was a good deal more smoke than he had anticipated, too.

Through it, as through a veil, he saw a picture of the wildest disorder, although for this he was prepared. Everybody appeared to be running without any definite purpose, and certainly without achieving anything. One or two of the soldiers were beating at the edge of the flames with their jackets although this was so obviously futile that he wondered why they persisted. They might as well have tried to extinguish a volcano with the same appliances. Apparently obeying the hysterical screaming of his commanding officer one man did run forward as if he intended snatching something from the holocaust, but seeing the flames already licking at the dynamite, he lost his nerve and—very wisely Algy thought—ran back.

Algy held his breath, for it was evident that an explosion might occur

at any moment now, and if it did, somebody, probably several people, were certainly going to be hurt. But the troops realised that, too. One started running, and the rest, taking the hint, followed. A length of instantaneous fuse went off like a squib and hastened their departure. That was the end of any attempt at fire fighting.

To his amazement Algy saw Ma Chang, followed by two of his men, dash into the guest-house, presumably for shelter. Either they didn't realise what was inside or else they had forgotten. However, they must have discovered it, for they came out even faster than they had gone in. Indeed, so fast did they run that Algy couldn't repress a smile. They had just flung themselves under the poplars when the end came.

There was a vivid flash and an ear-splitting crack as what must have been a box of detonators went up. Being in close proximity the dynamite needed no further encouragement. Everything seemed to go up together, including the guest-house, the fuse leading to it having been fired.

Algy was prepared for a healthy explosion, but not for what actually happened. The blast shook him in more senses than one, to say nothing of half burying him under sand. It was not only sand that went into the air, and he covered his head with his hands as debris rained down from the smoke-filled sky.

Half blinded by the flying dust it was a minute or two before he could see anything clearly. When he could, the first thing he noticed was a black smoking crater where the explosive had been dumped. The guesthouse had vanished as completely as if it had never been. The mud bricks of which it had been built were never intended to take such a strain. Nobody appeared to be hurt, at any rate seriously, for the soldiers could be seen standing at a distance gazing at the ruins as if they found it hard to believe their eyes. They were no longer laughing, or even talking. The only casualty, as far as Algy could make out, was one who sat on the ground holding his head as if something had fallen on it. His comrades took no notice of him.

Algy was more concerned about the horses. Their reaction to the explosion, while not remarkable, was not in his programme. They had stampeded. The tethering rope, unable to hold them in their first frantic plunge had broken, and they were now galloping about in all directions. He was sorry about this; and he was not thinking only of the beasts. It would take some time to round them up and the soldiers would have to remain until this was done. He was anxious for them to go. Apart from being anxious to know what had happened to Ginger,

he wanted to finish the work of clearing the landing-strip, which for one reason or another had been held up longer than he liked.

When the troops had recovered sufficiently from their shock to move, their behaviour indicated, as Algy hoped might happen, that they took it for granted the calamity was accidental. At least, they did not make a search; nor did they trouble to examine the ground where the explosion had occurred. Not that they would have found anything if they had. Instead, faced with the disagreeable prospect of having to walk back to their barracks, they employed themselves in catching their mounts. This took some time, although not as long as Algy feared it might. When the animals had all been rounded up the troops simply rode off without a backward glance. This of course suited Algy, who lay watching them until he was sure that there was no likelihood of their return.

Getting up at last he continued on his way, keeping well back from the edge of the cliff until he reached the far end, where he found the whole party waiting, prepared to move to the crypt should it have been necessary. Ginger was not there, but in view of what had happened Algy didn't expect to see him. On the other hand, Algy's appearance was greeted with exclamations of relief, for neither Ritzen nor the others knew really what had happened on the oasis. Hearing the explosion, they said, they were afraid that the central part of the cliff had been blown up while he was still there. Wherefore his arrival was greeted with satisfaction. The news that the troops had gone produced smiles.

"Have the caves been damaged?" asked Ritzen.

Algy said that as he hadn't been there he didn't know. "What was that tremendous explosion?"

"That was the dynamite going off," answered Algy, grinning. "As a matter of fact it went off a little before they were ready for it."

Ritzen looked at him suspiciously. "Did you have a hand in this?"

"I helped," admitted Algy.

"Where are the soldiers now?"

"When I last saw them they were heading for the horizon." Algy became serious. "What about Ginger? Have you heard anything about the others?"

"Not a word."

"Ming hasn't come back?"

"Then I think he must have found them," opined Algy. "Otherwise they would have been back by now."

Hardly had he finished speaking when Ming appeared. He looked hot and dusty but he was smiling, which Algy took to be a good sign.

And so it turned out, as a quick conversation with Ritzen confirmed. Said the Swedish missionary, look at Algy: "They're all here."

"All?"

"Yes, I mean all the prisoners except the Abbot, who has been let out of jail but is staying at Tunhwang."

"That's marvellous!" cried Algy. "Where are they?"

"Waiting in a valley near at hand."

"Then tell Ming to go and bring them in. He can say they can go straight to the oasis. It's all clear."

This message was conveyed to Ming, who departed at high speed.

"We might as well get back to our original quarters if they haven't been damaged," said Algy. "On second thoughts, I think we'll go down to the oasis first. I need a wash and a drink. We can move these stores back the caves afterwards."

They all trooped down to the clearing close to where the guest-house had been. The fire had burnt itself out for want of fuel, but the ground in and around the crater was still smoking. I

Ritzen looked upset when he saw that the guest-house had disappeared. "The Abbot will be heart-broken about that," he said gravely. "It took him years to build it, stone by stone, with pennies donated by pilgrims. He'll think it a poor return for having sheltered us."

"I'm sorry about it, too," replied Algy. "But I wasn't responsible for that. It would have gone anyway. It's better that it should go than that we should all lose our lives. After all, it is always possible to build another house. I'll make a note to see that as soon as it's possible the Abbot gets enough money to build an even better guest-house."

Ginger, smiling wearily, now appeared at the head of his party.

For a little while there was a lot of talking while congratulations were exchanged, introductions effected and explanations offered. Ginger naturally wanted to know what had caused the explosion. Algy told him. "That was great work," said Ginger enthusiastically. Algy wanted to know what had become of the Kirghiz. This time it was Ginger who supplied the information.

"You must be pretty well all in," asserted Algy. He turned to Ritzen. "You might ask Feng to look after the horses. These people need rest and something to eat. So do we all, for that matter. There'll be plenty of time for talking later. I think our troubles are over now. I—" He broke off suddenly in a listening position. "What on earth's that?" he demanded, a hint of alarm in his voice.

Everyone stopped talking.

From the far end of the oasis came a sound so curious and out of place that Algy stared at Ritzen in questioning astonishment. It was the ringing of a bell.

"Now what's coming?" muttered Ginger.

The Swede smiled. "It's all right. It's only a holy man, probably a mendicant monk going his rounds, begging. I don't think we have anything to fear from him. They're good men, always seeking what they call *Tao*, which means The Light. They travel vast distances."

The clanging bell drew nearer. A figure came into view. He wore a grey cloak. A bundle was strapped on his back. In one hand he carried a long staff and in the other a polished wooden bowl.

"Yes, he's a travelling monk, with his begging bowl," said Ritzen. "There are a lot of them about."

The traveller gave no sign that he had seen the little group of people watching him, but strode on, ringing his bell at intervals, until he was quite close. Then he stopped and said something in a high-pitched voice.

"He says he has a message," translated Ritzen.

"A message!" echoed Algy. "For whom?"

Ritzen addressed the monk.

The monk replied.

The Swede looked at Algy. "For you, I think."

"For me?"

"He says it's for an Englishman at Nan-hu."

Lines of incredulity creased Algy's forehead. "But that's impossible."

Ritzen shrugged.

By this time the monk was feeling in a little beaded bag that he had taken from his pack. From an assortment of strange odds and ends he picked a slip of folded paper. This, with a bow, he handed to Ritzen. Ritzen passed it on to Algy. With an extraordinary expression on his face Algy took it.

In dead silence he unfolded it. He stared at it. He looked up again, the colour fading from his face. His lips moved, but no sound came. Slowly, as if with difficulty, he turned to Ginger.

"Well!" demanded Ginger impatiently.

Algy moistened his lips. "It's from Biggles," he said in a dazed voice.

"From Biggles?"

"Yes."

"Don't be silly." Frank disbelief cracked Ginger's voice.

"It's from Biggles," repeated Algy.

"What does he say? What's it about? Read it!"

Algy looked again at the paper. "It's dated five days ago."

"The day we were dropped in."

"Yes. He says 'Am on the ground about fifty miles south of you. Having some trouble, but think we can put it right. Thought we had better let you know. If we don't show up in ten days from date above, count us out and do the best you can. Sorry. Biggles.'"

There was dead silence.

Ginger took the slip. "It's from Biggles all right. This is a leaf from his notebook."

"Yes. I saw that."

Ginger went on: "He must have gone down soon after he left us. I mean, it happened on the way home."

"Of course. He wouldn't have been coming back yet."

"And he's been there all this time!"

"Obviously."

Ginger looked at the monk reproachfully. "This chap has been five days getting here," he said bitterly.

Dr. McDougall interposed. "Ten miles a day is not bad going in this country. The man had no reason to hurry. Time means nothing to him. We're lucky he managed to get here at all, and find us."

"I suppose you're right," acquiesced Algy in a tired voice. "This knocks me flat, and I don't mind admitting it."

"Just a minute," said Ginger. "How could Biggles talk to this chap?"

Ritzen put the question to the monk. When it was answered he turned to Algy and explained.

"This man is a Gurkha from Nepal, on the Thibetan frontier. Nepal is closely associated with the life of Buddha, which is why he is here. He has also been to India. He says the Englishman spoke to him in Hindi."*

Algy nodded. "Ah! That explains it."

"What will you do about this?" asked Ritzen.

"Frankly, I don't know," replied Algy. "I shall have to think about it. I haven't got over the shock yet. I gather from Biggles' message that he had trouble with the machine. Just how bad it was he obviously didn't know at the time he sent the message, or he would have told us about it. There is this to comfort us. It could hardly be anything definitely vital or he would have said so. The implication is that he hoped to get the trouble put right. We shall simply have to wait and see. He'll get here if it's humanly possible, you may be sure. Meanwhile, we might as well make ourselves comfortable. Perhaps the ladies will be good

enough to produce something to eat. We shall have to go steady on food, though, now that it looks as if we might be here for some time."

Having no more to say, Algy walked over to a stone that had been used as a seat and sat down on it.

Ginger went with him. "That's a tough break," he commiserated.

"Just as I thought we'd got everything on the top line," muttered Algy.

Ginger rested his chin in his hand. "Well, it's just one of those things," was all he could say.

* Readers of *Biggles Goes To School* will know why Biggles was able to speak Hindi.

CHAPTER X BAD LUCK FOR BIGGLES

BIGGLES had met trouble from a cause which, while fortunately not common, has happened more often than is generally realised, and is a regular hazard over a particular type of country in certain parts of the world. In quite a few cases the result has been fatal for the aircraft and its crew. In a word, he was in collision with a bird.

Collisions with smaller birds that congregate in numbers, such as seagulls, are such a constant menace on certain stations, notably marine airports, that all sorts of devices have been adopted to deal with the problem, from firing Verey lights to the flying of specially trained birds of prey. The ancient sport of falconry, revived on some R.A.F. aerodromes, has done something to reduce the danger by scattering the offending birds when an aircraft is asking for permission to come in.

Naturally, the bigger the bird the more serious is the result of a collision, for which reason this particular type of accident has occurred most frequently with serious results over mountain regions overseas where eagles, condors; vultures and the like, are commonly to be found. The northern frontiers of India, Iraq and Palestine, have bad records, both civil and military machines having been victims. Aircraft have been brought down over the Andes and the Atlas

Mountains of North Africa. There has been more than one fatal accident over the European Alps. It is not unlikely that some of the unsolved

"mystery" accidents have been due to this same unpredictable factor, for which no pilot or his aircraft can be blamed. It is a flying risk that must be accepted in the same way that ships are exposed to dangers which neither seamanship nor scientific instruments have been able to eliminate entirely. No matter how wakeful an airman may be, all he can do to minimise the risk is by taking evasive action if he sees the bird in time. He does not always see it, nor can he be expected to see it if it is hovering in the sun well above him. Even if he does see it he may not be able to escape the bird if it attacks him, for the creature is in its element and he is not.

The question of how far these accidents have been the result of a deliberate attack has often been argued. The most feasible explanation is that it happens both ways. But there certainly have been occasions when big predatory birds have made an unprovoked onslaught on what they may regard as an intruder in their own particular domain. Surviving pilots have stated this. A bird, apparently, has not the sagacity to realise that, no matter what may happen to the aircraft, it must itself be killed—as it always is.

As far as the aircraft is concerned the result of such an encounter must, of course, depend on where it is struck; but it must be obvious that a weight of perhaps twenty pounds, travelling at high speed in the opposite direction, is bound to cause damage no matter where it may strike. Light planes have had a wing knocked clean off. Fabric coverings have been torn to pieces and wooden airscrews have been shattered. Even large

machines have had a main spar fractured. Radiators have been holed. In every case the bird was smashed to pulp.

The eagle that resented the intrusion of Biggles' Halifax came at him out of the blue. He saw it a split second before it struck. There was no time to do anything. A black mass blotted out his view. Almost simultaneously there was a tremendous crash and the windscreen was smothered with a sticky mess of blood and feathers. Biggles realised instantly what had happened. Shouting for Bertie, who was in the rear turret, he slipped quickly into the second pilot's seat, the forward view from his own being practically obliterated. It was not much better from the new position. Air pressure soon removed most of the feathers, but the blood appeared to be congealed, and the feathers that

remained, some with pieces of flesh adhering, looked like sticking to it. He throttled back to little more than a glide until the extent of the damage could be ascertained.

Bertie came scrambling into the darkened cockpit. He took one look and gasped: "I say, how disgusting!"

"Go to the astral dome and see if you can make out what has happened to the rest of the bird," ordered Biggles.

Bertie hurried off, He was soon back. "It's wrapped round the pressure pump," he reported.

"Then the pump can't be working."

"Don't see how it can, all tangled up in skin and bones."

"I shall have to go down," decided Biggles. "I daren't risk going on. This stuff will freeze solid when we come to the mountains. If it can be managed, I'd rather get down here while we're under control. What's below us? Have a look. I can't see anything from here. Buck up!"

The decision Biggles had made was prompted by the distance he had to go. Over a civilised country he would no doubt have tried to reach the nearest airport, which would not be far away; but he did not feel inclined to tackle twelve hundred miles over some of the worst country in the world with the possibility of structural or engine failure hanging over him. He was relieved to find the machine still airborne with the controls unaffected. It might have been worse, much worse. The bird might have struck one of the wooden airscrews, for instance, in which case the flying splinters might have smashed its neighbour, forcing him to go down immediately regardless of the type of country underneath. He had at least been given time to think.

Bertie came back. "Keep her going!" he exclaimed. "Keep going just as you are. We're in luck. You've a green flat patch straight ahead."

"Green?" queried Biggles, still losing height. "Well, fairly green."

"Are you sure it isn't a bog?"

"I couldn't see any water. We're over that broad basin between hills which we noticed on the way out."

Biggles went on down, peering through one of the small clear places

in the perspex. He could see a range of hills some distance ahead.

"Keep her straight," commanded Bertie. "You're doing fine. You've miles of room. I can't see anything in the way."

In a long flying career Biggles had made many anxious landings. He had made landings in even more risky places, but seldom had so much depended on touching down without mishap. Not being able to see clearly was the trouble; otherwise, as he remarked when they were on the ground, the thing would have been simple. As it was, he could see through the side windows but not in the direction in which he was travelling. Bertie did all that was possible in the way of a running commentary. "You're doing fine," he kept saying, encouragingly. "Starboard a little ... Little more. . . Okay. Hold her there. You're at a hundred feet for a guess. All clear ahead. Nearly there. Steady!"

Biggles eased the control column back gently. The machine began to sink.

"Now!" yelled Bertie.

Biggles flattened out, a few feet too high, judging from the bump he took when the machine lost flying speed. He held his breath until the machine touched again. Another small bump or two and the Halifax rumbled quietly to a standstill.

"Magnificent, old boy! Absolutely magnificent!" cried Bertie.

"A bit on the high side," muttered Biggles, looking worried.

"Better to flatten out too soon than too late, laddie."

Biggles closed his eyes, shook his head, and passed a hand over his face. "You know, Bertie, the trouble with me is, I'm getting a bit too old for this sort of aviation," he said sadly. "All right," he went on quickly, pulling himself together. "Let's get down and see the extent of the mischief. Where did that infernal bird come from? Did you see it?"

"Not until it was right on top of us. Came down like a ton of bricks. Beautiful dive, pretty to watch, and all that—but a bit too close."

Luck, it is said, usually balances itself in the long run. What Biggles saw when he jumped down and surveyed the landscape appeared to be a good example. It had been brutal luck to be grounded by a bird, but if it had to happen the creature couldn't have chosen a better place for him. The collision had occurred over a range of hills that

fringed the eastern side of a wide plain that was partly level and partly undulating. Areas of rushes in the lower places hinted at water not far down. This was to be expected, since the plain was really a vast basin that drained higher ground that surrounded it on all sides.

But Biggles' good luck, counterbalancing the bad, was even better than that. In the first place, he suspected that had he touched down on the area that supported the reeds the wheels of the heavy machine would have broken through the surface. Again, there were places where he might have run into foothills on the opposite side of the basin. It so happened that his run had taken him into a long straight arm of flat ground between these same hills. Of course, Bertie had seen these, for which reason he had been definite in his instructions to carry straight on. Finally, a little to one side there was grey stone cairn, apparently a shrine of some sort, since there were carvings on it, which Bertie admitted he had *not* seen.

"It wouldn't have improved matters if we'd bumped, into that," remarked Biggles.

Bertie agreed.

As it was, the machine stood in a little world of its own without a living thing of any sort in sight. What relieved Biggles as much as anything was the fact that the flat arm of the plain ran on for some distance, giving him sufficient room to get off again quickly, should it be necessary, without turning the machine. As a sailor likes to be in a position to put to sea instantly in an emergency, so Biggles liked his aircraft to be all set for a quick take-off. He thought it was quite likely that they would have to take off in a hurry, always supposing that the Halifax was in a condition to do so.

The examination of the aircraft did not take long.

To say that no serious damage had been done would not be true; but it could have been much more serious. The sticky mess of gore on the windscreen was nothing. That could soon be cleaned off. Unfortunately, however the bulk of the bird, the entrails, sinews and talons, glancing off the perspex, had hurtled away until it was caught by the pressure pump between the top of the cockpit and the centre turret. Apart from that there was little to worry about. The eagle's curved beak had gashed the leading edge of the centre-section. That, too could be put right, although it might take a little time.

Grimacing with disgust Biggles removed the pulverised carcass from

the pump and threw it on the ground. Then, very carefully, he examined the pump.

"It's a bit bent," he announced. "Enough to throw it off balance, I'm afraid. I wonder the whole thing wasn't carried away."

"Can we fix it?" asked Bertie anxiously.

"I think so, but it'll take time." Biggles glanced at the sun. "It's going to be thunderingly hot here presently so the sooner we get cracking the better." He climbed down, wiping his hands on the grass and throwing off his jacket.

Although the work to be done appeared to offer no great difficulty, and would, in fact, have been a simple matter at a maintenance unit where every sort of repair equipment was available, it was soon clear that, without such facilities, it would take some time. They worked all the morning, Biggles on the pump and Bertie on the centre-section, stopping occasionally to scan the landscape for possible visitors. None came.

About two o'clock Bertie suggested that it was time they had something to eat, so Biggles reluctantly knocked off for this purpose. He walked over to the shrine and found, as he expected, that it was also a well, with a plaited rope and an ancient leather bucket for drawing up the water. The place gave the appearance of being seldom visited. There was drinking water in the machine, but none to spare, so this new source of supply enabled him to have a good wash which, after the dirty work on which he had been engaged, was desirable before touching food. He got his hands fairly clean by scrubbing

them with sand and moss. This done, he joined Bertie, who was eating jammy biscuits in the shade of a wing.

"You know, old boy, as long as we don't get any bally interruptions it doesn't really matter how long we stay here," said Bertie. "It isn't as though we had anything to do back at base."

"I can see an interruption coming now," observed Biggles.

"Where?"

"Over there."

A solitary figure in a grey cloak had emerged from the hills and was walking towards them. They watched him with curiosity as, about

every hundred yards, he stopped and rang a bell.

"Well, stuff me with suet pudding! If it isn't the muffin-man," exclaimed Bertie. "He's not likely to do what you'd call a roaring trade out here—if you see what I mean."

"I'd say he's one of these wandering holy men out on a little stroll of a thousand miles or so. It looks as though he's coming over to this shrine, possibly to get a drink. We needn't worry about him. He's not likely to interfere with us."

"As long as he doesn't talk and give us away."

"That depends on where he's going and who he talks to. Actually, these fellows are not much given to talking. They keep to themselves."

The man came on, occasionally stopping to ring his bell.

"The old boy must be nuts," murmured Bertie. "Absolute nuts. What's the idea of the bell? Is that to let the customers know that he's about?"

"The bell is to scare off evil spirits," explained Biggles. "Bells and gongs are reckoned to be pretty potent in this part of the world."

"He may have something there," agreed Bertie. "There's certainly plenty of room for spooks to get around without bumping into each other."

The monk approached. He stopped at a distance of a few yards, leaning on his staff. With the other hand he held out a polished wooden bowl.

"What's in the dish?" asked Bertie.

"Nothing," Biggles told him.

"I told you he was nuts."

"He's hoping we'll put something in it."

"Such as?"

"Offerings. Money. He's after our loose change."

"Ah! I should have guessed there was a catch in it," said Bertie sadly.

The monk bowed low, and said something in a high-pitched nasal voice.

Biggles' eyebrows went up. He smiled and answered. A short conversation ensued.

"Are you kidding?" enquired Bertie, looking suspiciously at Biggles.

"No."

"What lingo do you call that?"

"Hindi. This old boy has been to India, or one of the frontier states." Biggles got up, took some loose coins from his pocket and dropped them in the bowl.

"What's the use of money to him here, he can't spend it?" said Bertie practically. "He's right off his course for shops. Give him a biscuit."

Biggles took the suggestion seriously. He invited the monk to come nearer and gave him some biscuits. The man seemed delighted to have them. Another conversation followed.

"Believe it or not, he's making for the guest-house at Nan-hu," Biggles told Bertie.

"Tell him to remember us to the boys."

The casual expression on Biggles' face changed. "That's the brightest thing you've said for some time," he asserted. "If he's going there he could take a message. Algy might as well know what's happened. If by any chance we can't get the pump to function, he will at least know where we are and how we're fixed. If we can't get back to him on time he'll understand why. It's no use him standing on the airstrip, if it turns out that we can't get back to Nan-hu."

Bertie looked shocked. "Can't get back? I say, go steady old boy. You're putting the wind up me."

"Well, let's look at it like this," went on Biggles. "If it should so happen that we can't get home, we shall have to try to get back to Nan-hu—somehow. It's no use sitting here for the rest of our lives. Algy will get in a flap if we don't turn up on time. This seems to be a heaven-sent opportunity to let him know what's happened. We can do no harm by sending a message. This chap is going to Nan-hu anyway."

"True enough," agreed Bertie.

"I'll send Algy a note," asserted Biggles. He had another word with the

monk. Then he tore a leaf from his notebook, wrote the message on it and handed it over. He also put the rest of his loose money into the man's bowl.

They talked a little while longer while the monk finished his biscuits. He then went over to the shrine, spent a minute or two on his knees, had a drink and went on his way. Biggles and Bertie could hear the bell, a strange sound in the empty wilderness, for a long time.

"I told him if he met anyone on the way not to mention that we are here," said Biggles. "Let's get on with the job."

They resumed work.

The sun was well down by the time Biggles was satisfied that they had at least done all that was possible. He made a test by running up the engines, and was well pleased to find that, as far as could be ascertained, everything was in order.

"Are we pushing off right away?" asked Bertie.

"I was just thinking about that," answered Biggles. "If we take off now it means that we shall arrive back in Dacca in the dark. I'd rather get there in daylight, so that we can see what we're doing."

"Fair enough," agreed Bertie. "I don't see any need to hurry. I'm quite comfortable here." After a moment he went on, in a different tone of voice, as if an idea had struck him. "Wait a minute, old boy. Why need we go back at all?"

For a moment Biggles looked startled.

"If we're not going back until tomorrow we might as well hang on for another day or two; in fact, till it's time to go back for the boys— if you get my meaning," explained Bertie. "What's the sense in waffling all the way back to Dacca just to turn the machine round and come back again? We've nothing to do there."

Providing none of the local lads come along and start throwing their weight about we're more comfy her than roaring to and fro over those ghastly mountains After all, we can always push off if we have to—if you follow me."

Biggles lit a cigarette. "There's something in that he agreed. "Let me think about it."

"It's a corking idea," declared Bertie.

"Maybe," assented Biggles cautiously.

"What's against it, old boy? You tell me. You're better than I am at thinking things out."

"It means an alteration of plan, that's all," answer Biggles. "When an arrangement is made it's usually best for everyone to stick to it. To switch off at a tangent can be dangerous."

"We could rattle over and see how the boys are getting on with the airstrip?" suggested Bertie, in support his idea.

"There's no need to do anything in a hurry. So let's sit down and think about it," concluded Biggles, finding a seat in a shade cast by the wings.

CHAPTER XI COUNTING THE HOURS

AT the oasis, the bombshell effect of Biggles' message soon wore off, and while Ming resumed his post as sentry, and the others rested, Algy and Ginger discussed the implications of the message from all angles. Algy had told Ginger what had happened at Nan-hu during his absence, and Ginger in turn had narrated the story of the rescue of the prisoners. He also revealed what had happened to the Kirghiz. All this took time.

Apart from the doubts about the completion of the original plan there were several other loose ends, as Algy' called them. There was, for example, this question of the Kirghiz who had fled when they learned that troops were at the oasis. Where had they gone? Would they come back? If they did not, what was to be done with their wounded comrade? Then there were the horses.

Ginger put forward a suggestion that one of these might be used by someone willing to try to contact Biggles, if he was still at the place where he had forced-landed. The exact position could be ascertained from the monk, who was resting before going on to the Lake of the Crescent Moon, which he had said was the next stage of his journey. But Algy would not have this. For one thing he thought it was too dangerous, and secondly, there was hardly time for such a trip. They

were now in the fifth day. The next dawn but one would see Biggles at Nan-hu if he was coming. When he failed to keep the appointment would be time enough to start looking for him.

There was talk of using the radio, but this also was vetoed as being too dangerous. In any case it was by no means certain that they would be able to contact the aircraft while it was on the ground, even if it was still in the region. It was not worth the risk of being overheard by the ever-listening ears on the Red Highway decided Algy.

A lengthy discussion resulted in nothing definite being settled. They had better get the airstrip finished advised Algy. That was the important thing. With more hands on the job this should not take long. There was only the final tidying up to be done, and the markers put out. He would get the ladies to make an inventory of the remaining stores in case they had to put themselves on rations. Not counting the wounded Kirghiz, there were now ten mouths to fill. They did not go into this in detail, but they were aware that even with rationing their food supply would not last long—another week at the outside. After that they would be faced with starvation, for what with raiding Kirghiz and Chinese troops the oasis had been pretty well skinned of fruit and vegetables, and it could produce nothing more until the next harvest. There could be no question of sending Ming or Feng to Tunhwang to buy food for the simple reason that no money in local currency was available.

The conference ended on a note of doubt and indecision.

Algy then got the work resumed on the airstrip and put in a request for the remaining food to be checked.

Towards evening, Ritzen, who had stopped work several times to look at the sun, across which a thin veil appeared to have been drawn, said he did not like the look of the weather. He was afraid there was wind coming. The Gobi, he added, was notorious for its winds—a remark that did nothing to brighten the outlook.

"Of course, if the weather is going to turn sour on us that will throw the spanner in the works properly," Algy told Ginger gloomily.

A little later, a fitful breeze, only slight as yet, moaned across the waste to support Ritzen's observation. Gentle though it was, it was sufficient to indicate what a real storm would be like. Little eddies of dust coiled along the ground and the dead tamarisk shrubs seemed to be whispering to each other of the ordeal to be faced.

At sundown they were returning to the oasis, and had nearly reached the path, when Ming appeared, moving at a speed that could only mean one thing.

Algy glanced at Ginger, then at Ritzen, who was walking with them. "Now what?" he said irritably.

Four Kirghiz were coming fast towards the oasis, reported Ming.

They must be the fellows who bolted," guessed Ginger.

"Coming to collect their horses and their sick pal, I suppose," opined Algy. "I hope they'll soon clear off. We don't want them hanging about here. Oh yes, I know they were useful on one occasion but they always seem to carry a load of trouble. Without wishing any harm I don't want them to spill it on us."

They went on to the oasis where a meal of hashed corn beef and rice had been prepared.

The entire party was seated round it when the Kirghiz arrived on the scene in what might best be described a disorderly rush. Flinging themselves off their horses they said something to Ritzen in a manner that was brusque, to say the least of it.

"What do they want?" asked Algy, who was far from pleased by their intrusion.

"They demand food."

"Food. Tell them we're sorry but we have none to spare. We shall need every scrap of what we have. I can let them have a handful or two of rice, but that's all we can manage."

There was more talk and Ritzen went on. "They say they must have much food. They are on the run. Soldiers are after them; they're going to leave the district and they have a long journey before them.

"To the deuce with that for a tale," expostulated Algy. "Tell them they're lucky that we could let have any at all."

There was another exchange of words, now in a tone that Ginger did not like. The expressions on the faces of the missionaries, who understood what was being and who had stopped eating to listen, told him the argument was taking a nasty turn.

The face that Ritzen turned to Algy was serious. "We shall have to give them a quantity," he said quietly. They say that if we don't give it they'll take it-and they will, too, and think nothing of it."

"Why are they in such a hurry?" asked Algy. "D'you believe this story about them being on the run?"

"Yes. It sounds reasonable to me. They say they've heard that many more soldiers have arrived in Tunhwang, and the Tiger has given orders that all Kirghiz are to be hunted down and exterminated. These fellows are making for the mountains of Turkistan. That's a long step from here. They say they must have food for the journey for there is none to be had either in this district or on the way. They say that if we will give them food they won't trouble us again."

"What do you suggest?"

"We're really in no position to argue. My advice is, give them a fair quantity or they will murder us and take the lot. These men don't make idle threats. They mean what they say. We're in no state to oppose them. It's more than likely that if we hadn't taken care of their wounded companion they would have killed and robbed us anyway."

Algy looked at the sullen faces of the barbaric tribesmen and knew that Ritzen was telling the truth. They were armed to the teeth. "All right," he assented reluctantly. It went against the grain to have to submit to force, but he could see there was nothing else for it.

The outlaws stood watching in silence while a quantity of rice, biscuits and cheese, was put together and handed over. This they took without a word. They then fetched their sick comrade, lifted him on his horse, and taking the Chinese horses with them, rode off.

"I hate parting with all that food," grumbled Algy watching them go.

"There was no alternative. We were lucky to get off as lightly as we have," averred Ritzen, and the others agreed.

"Aye, had we refused the rascals they would have killed the lot of us," declared Dr. McDougall.

Father Dubron nodded in confirmation.

They continued with their so rudely interrupted meal.

Half an hour later, just as they had finished tidying up and were

preparing to retire for the night, there was consternation when, before they could move, seven more Kirghiz came clattering up. They seemed to be in even greater hurry than the first lot.

"What is it this time?" asked Algy, speaking through his teeth.

"They demand food," translated Ritzen, shrugging his shoulders helplessly.

"What, again! Tell them that we have no food for ourselves, let alone any spare food to give away."

The Swede complied. The information was received with scowls and maledictions. Indeed, so ugly did things look that Ginger's hand went instinctively to the pocket where he carried his gun.

"They say we are liars," translated Ritzen, in a hopeless sort of voice. "They swear we have plenty of food for in the desert, they met friends who told them so. I'm afraid it's no use denying it."

"That's what we get for giving way to that other bunch," muttered Algy savagely. "I wish I had a machine gun. I'd teach these confounded thieves a lesson."

"You haven't got one so you'll have to give in," said Ritzen calmly.

"But we've practically nothing left."

"If you refuse they'll take the lot and our lives as well," said Ritzen. "I know these people better than you do and I know what I'm talking about."

Nearly choking with anger and mortification Algy saw that he would have to submit. Much as he hated parting with their now meagre supply of food he realised that the Swede was telling the simple truth. With two pistols between the lot of them they were in no condition to fight seven fully armed bandits.

Ginger, tight-lipped, remembered the wretched king, Ethelred the Unready, who, in buying off his enemies, only encouraged further demands. There was this about it he thought morosely. There could be no repetition of this outrage for the simple reason they had nothing left to give.

Practically all the remaining food was set before the brigands, who, shouting, said it was not enough. At this, Ritzen himself got angry,

and shouted back that there was no more. If they could find any more they were welcome to it.

This was as near the truth as made no difference. All that remained was a small quantity of emergency rations in the deepest part of the caves.

Anyway, Ritzen managed to convince the marauders, who snatched up the food and galloped away, the horses hoofs kicking dust into the faces of their victims as a final insult.

"If the aircraft doesn't turn up on time, now we are sunk," said Algy grimly. "We've barely enough for left for one day."

"Instead of crying over spilt milk I think we'd bet get ourselves to the caves in case any more of the toughs come along," said Ginger practically.

"There's no doubt about one thing," put in Ritzen soberly. "If the Kirghiz, who are desperate fighters and not given to panic, are clearing out, it can only mean that the Chinese Government troops are going to start a big operation at last to clear them out of the country. I can't imagine where they'll go because Kirghistan, their own country, has already been taken over by the Soviets, a state to which these wild men will not submit. For years they've plundered this part of Asia but now seems that the end has come."

"Pity it had to happen just at this moment," return Algy dolefully. "Will the troops catch up with them, do you think?"

"They won't need to do that. By putting a guard on the water-holes, they'll force them to leave the district —unless they prefer to die of thirst."

"If they put a guard on this place it'll be just dandy," muttered Algy. "What a bedlam this is! The sooner I'm out of it the better I'll be pleased, and I shan't lose any sleep if I never see it again. Which reminds me, let's get some sleep while we can."

"When we wake up to-morrow we can say, only one more day," announced Ginger cheerfully. "We're still alive, anyhow, and that's something to be thankful for considering all that's happened."

A general move was made towards the sleeping quarters and night settled over the strife-stricken oasis that had for centuries been a haven of rest and peace.

When Ginger awoke in the morning his first feeling was one of relief that they had got through the night without any more worries piling up on them. After all that had happened he had got into the way of expecting trouble, as if he were living in a jungle of wild beasts that were for ever stalking each other and in which he might be the next victim. He consoled himself with the thought that with any luck it would not go on much longer. Just one more day.

An unusual sound took him to the entrance of the cave. It was just beginning to get light. But it was not one of those still, silent dawns, to which they had become accustomed. Ritzen had been right about the weather. A wind was blowing. It was not a gale, or anything like one; but it was enough to set the trees waving and, in gusts, fill the air with particles of sand. It was not enough to cause him serious alarm, provided it did not get worse. The only fear that crossed his mind was that the dead shrubs which they had pulled out of the landing-strip and put on one side might blow about and have to be picked up again.

Standing on the ledge he had a good look at the ground below, for in view of the scheme to liquidate the Kirghiz another visit by Chinese communist troops seemed well within the realms of possibility. However, he could see nothing to arouse his suspicions so he went back into the cave to wake Algy and tell him about the wind.

Algy was soon on his feet, and together they went to look at the landing ground. As was to be expected some of the shrubs had been blown back on it, but these, they agreed, could soon be picked up. They returned to the caves, where the rest of the party were beginning to move about.

Nothing is more tiresome than to have nothing to do when one is in a state of suspense and anxiety. Thus it was as the day wore on at the oasis. The landing strip was cleared and the final touches made. Light stuff was lifted and carried to the lee of the depression where it could not blow back. After that there was really nothing more to be done, but Algy and Ginger, now counting the passing hours, continued to potter about doing anything rather than nothing.

About noon, the wind, which they were watching closely, showed signs of freshening. It was not actually the wind that worried them. There was not enough to effect the behaviour of an aircraft and it was coming from the right direction; that is to say, down the length of the runway. This was not an accident, for the strip had been laid out to conform to the prevailing wind, which the shape of the dunes and the slant of the trees made clear. It was the sand raised by the wind that

was the worry, for a high wind would inevitably result in a sandstorm, and this, by destroying visibility, would prevent the machine from locating the oasis; or even if the oasis were found it would not be possible to see the runway. There was nothing they could do about this. The weather, always a factor to be taken into account in aviation, was still something outside human control.

Lunch, such as it was, was taken almost in silence, the natural result of the nervous strain that was now beginning to tell on everyone. It saw the end of the food. Ginger could feel for the missionaries. He realised how awful it must be for them, after months of misery, to see the possibility of having the cup of salvation dashed from their lips at the last moment. He admired their courage and fortitude, for not a word of complaint did they say. He thought of some of the people at home who were for ever complaining of the hardness of their lot. What, he wondered, would they think of this. The two women went about their work quietly and efficiently. The men, oddly enough, represented several different forms of Christianity, yet here they were, all pulling on the same rope, each doing his best to help the others. To Ginger there was something fine about this, something which put him on his mettle.

The meal finished, he had just started for the landing strip with Algy and some of the men, when Feng, who was taking a turn at sentry-go, came leaping down the nearest slope making frantic signals as he ran. Knowing that he must have news, and that any news he could bring must be bad, Algy looked at Ginger and shook his head sadly. "Here we go again," he said, in a voice calm with resignation. "I may be wrong, but I'm afraid this may be it."

Whether he meant seriously what he said was immaterial. Certainly it looked for a little while as if his pessimism was justified, for the news was not merely bad, but just about as bad as it could be.

Feng let it out in a torrent of words and urgent gesticulations.

The gist of it was, horsemen were galloping towards Nan-hu; not one party, which would have been bad enough, but two separate groups. They were converging on the oasis. Who they were Feng was not sure; he couldn't see clearly on account of the sand that was blowing about and he daren't wait for them to get nearer; but he thought one party were Kirghiz, and the other, Chinese troops riding to cut them off. There were at least a dozen Kirghiz, but they were far outnumbered by the soldiers. In any case they were all making for Nan-hu at full gallop.

"The Kirghiz must be the two lots who pinched our food last night," said Algy. "They must have got together and then run into one of the bands of cavalry sent out to round them up. I imagine that they're making for the oasis as the only place where there's any cover for them to fight it out. Our one hope is that they don't find us. Into the caves, everybody. Take everything. Ritzen, you might ask Feng to get the ladies into the safest place possible; but tell him not to lose touch with us. That's all."

There was a general scramble to get out of sight.

Algy and Ginger remained near the mouth of their usual cave, in a position from which they would be able to watch what went on below with little risk of being seen themselves. They knew what was going to happen because the shooting had already started, although the opposing forces were not yet in sight. Shouts could be heard in the distance, but there was still a little delay before the combatants appeared.

During this interval Algy gave it as his opinion that the Kirghiz had reached the oasis first, and as soon as they were able to take cover either among the trees or in the bed of the stream they had turned to fight a rearguard action. They would have no hope in the open against the superior force, which would quickly surround them.

Apparently something of the sort happened, for the shooting drew nearer, very gradually, as if the bandits were disputing every inch of ground. But they had to fall back, and after a little while the first Kirghiz appeared, leading several sweating horses. He was limping badly, and Ginger recognised him as the wounded man whom they had sheltered in the cave.

Watching the man as he led his companions' horses into the shade of the poplars, Ginger felt a twinge of conscience at the part he was playing. He had no particular affection for the outlaws; they were, he did not doubt, what the missionaries had called them—thieves and vagabonds. But still, he couldn't forget that they had been allies against a common enemy. True, in helping with the rescue of the missionaries the Kirghiz had been actuated mostly by monetary motives; but even so, it didn't alter the fact that they had all worked together, and for that reason he felt that they ought to help him. And it is likely that he would have suggested this had he been able to see how they could serve any useful purpose. But what difference could two pistols make in a battle of this sort, he asked himself. His commonsense told him that to take part would merely be to throw

their own lives away uselessly. He hoped the Kirghiz would win, if for no other reason than that Ma Chang and his troops were a greater menace than the outlaws, not only to themselves but to the world at large.

Very soon a bitter battle was being fought out on the oasis. For some time neither side seemed to gain any appreciable advantage. The bandits, who must have known they were doomed, were obviously determined to sell their lives dearly. There were casualties on both sides. Men could be seen lying about. Some crawled or dragged themselves painfully to any protection they could find. Being wounded, Ginger noted, did not prevent the Kirghiz from fighting. While they could lift a rifle they continued to do so. No mercy was shown on either side. Wounded men were killed out of hand whenever opportunity offered. This reflected Ginger, with growing horror, was total war with a vengeance.

The rattle of musketry, while not particularly heavy, was incessant, bullets kicking dust spots in the sand and slashing through the trees. The caves had so far been ignored; for which Ginger was thankful. The soldiers, of course, had no reason to seek refuge. But why hadn't the Kirghiz retired to them? This puzzled Ginger for a little while. He could only suppose that they were reluctant to do so because, once inside they would be trapped, with no hope of ever getting out again. Apart from that they would be loath to abandon the horses on which their lives had always depended.

Algy's dominant emotions were helplessness and frustration. Never in so short a time had he been faced with successive situations in which he was completely powerless to do anything. Over and over again he asked himself what Biggles would have done in these circumstances.

He was unable to find an answer, and doubted whether Biggles would have been able to find one, either. It was true that neither he nor those in the caves were in immediate danger. But the peril was plain enough to see. It was merely being postponed. The end would come when the battle was over and the troops could spare time to mop the place up thoroughly.

From time to time he caught sight of Ma Chang, who was conducting what had started as a battle but was now becoming a massacre. He was tempted to take a shot at him, but perceived the folly of revealing that the caves were occupied. Once a Kirghiz broke cover and made a dash for the path leading to the ledge; but he did not get far. Several shots were fired. The outlaw spun round, lost his balance and crashed

down into the stream. The Tiger ran over to him, and with what seemed to Algy to be a horrible exhibition of blood lust, fired a bullet into his head.

The shooting was now becoming more desultory and Algy knew that the grim finale could not be long delayed. Every now and then, as one of the brigands was hunted down, there would be a brisk burst of fire. Then silence. The intervals between these incidents became longer, and the reason was evident. Any Kirghiz who were left alive were hiding, or trying to hide. Outnumbered as they were they had no chance. It must have been clear to them from the outset that their only real hope lay in flight, reflected Algy. The reason why they had stopped to fight it out, he could only suppose, was because their horses had reached exhaustion point.

Came a time when the shooting ended and the troops began to muster where the guest-house had been.

Algy looked at Ginger. "That seems to be the payoff," he said softly. "I'm afraid the wretched Kirghiz have had the chop. It was bound to end that way. Nothing we could have done would have made the slightest difference." He shrugged. "It'll come to the same thing in the end, I suppose. There's just a chance that the Tiger will push off now he's finished cleaning up the Kirghiz, but we'd be silly to reckon too much on that. Well, I'm not going to be butchered like a sheep. If I can scupper that ruffian Ma Chang, I shall be satisfied. What's going on down there? Something seems to be causing some excitement."

Ginger had been watching. "They've been looting the dead Kirghiz and must have found the cartons of food we gave them last night. Yes, that's it. That's a packet of English cigarettes Ma Chang is looking at."

"You're right," said Algy slowly. "I'm afraid that's just about torn it."

Below, yellow faces were now upturned towards the caves.

"I wonder what Biggles has been up to all this time," said Ginger, switching the subject.

Algy shrugged. "I wouldn't know."

Perhaps it was as well that they couldn't see Biggles at that moment.

Fifty odd miles away, on the plain where the Halifax had forced landed, Biggles and Bertie had passed through a period of boredom in which their only occupations had been eating, drinking and sleeping, although, of course, unceasing watch had been kept.

Bertie's idea that they should stay where they were had been adopted, chiefly because Biggles thought there was less chance of the machine being seen by hostile eyes where it was, even though it was in enemy territory, than in the air. Indeed, as he said to Bertie, he wondered why he hadn't planned the operation that way instead of having the situation forced on him. But then, as he pointed out, he hadn't known of the existence of the plain, which provided an almost perfect natural landing ground. From the outset it had been the landing that seemed to present the greatest danger of the entire undertaking. Had he known at the beginning what he knew now he would have planned accordingly, if for no other reason than it cut out the hazards of flying over more than two thousand miles of some of the worst country in the world. So, strangely enough, as the machine had suffered no serious damage the accident of the collision with the eagle had been no bad thing after all.

Apart from the itinerant monk, who had arrived so early on the scene, not a soul had appeared on the landscape. They might have had the continent of Asia to themselves. However, they did not relax their vigilance on that account. During the heat of the day they sat in the shadow of the aircraft. At night they took it in turns to sleep in the cabin.

Their food supply was getting low but this did not worry them. An ample supply of drinking water was available close at hand. It was not very palatable, being somewhat bitter, but so far they, had suffered no ill effects from drinking it.

Several times they discussed the pros and cons of flying to Nan-hu to see what was happening there. Biggles was against it. He was all for sticking to the letter of the plan as it was understood by themselves and Algy.

There was no guarantee that the monk had reached Nan-hu, that he would ever get there, or if he did, how long the journey would take. If, argued Biggles, they arrived over the oasis before the monk got there, and before the time planned, Algy would be bound to wonder what on earth had happened. If the landing strip was ready—Biggles

laid emphasis on the word if—all would be well. They would merely have to land and explain the circumstances. But if it wasn't ready they would merely throw Algy into a state of confusion; after which they would have to return to the plain and risk another landing there having achieved nothing. The landing would always be a risk.

Another point Biggles did not overlook was this. When he had written the message for the monk to take to Nan-hu, he had not ascertained the extent of the damage that the machine had suffered from its collision with the bird; for which reason he had taken the precaution of warning Algy that he might arrive later than the time arranged. Indeed, he had hinted broadly that he might not arrive at all, his purpose in this being to give the people at Nan-hu a chance to make their way to some place where food was available before their own supplies ran out. He wished now that he hadn't introduced this possibility. It might have been better not to send a message at all. But at the time he had acted for the best. As he told Bertie, it is always easy to see mistakes after the event.

However, as the days passed without incident there seemed every reason to hope that by arriving at the rendezvous on time the problem would solve itself.

It was on the morning of the fifth day that the first sign of life appeared in the wilderness that surrounded them. It took the form of a small cloud of dust that moved swiftly from side to side of the basin about a mile distant. It never came any nearer, but passed straight from one range of hills to another. They watched with interest and eventually made it out to be a small party of horsemen, not more than three or four, riding close together.

"Whoever those lads are they're in a deuce of a hurry," observed Biggles. "They're not coming this way so we've nothing to worry about."

The little party disappeared into the hills and the dust settled.

An hour later the same thing happened again, although this time the party seemed larger. It took the same line and eventually disappeared in the same way.

"There seems to be something going on," remarked Biggles casually. "The nomads who live in these parts may be rough riders, but I can't believe they'd travel lickety-split like that without a good reason."

Bertie said he couldn't agree more. Still, it seemed to be no concern of

theirs so he couldn't care less.

Towards sundown the same thing was repeated, but on this occasion the riders were on a course that brought them near to the aircraft. They turned out to be two Kirghiz. They took no notice whatever of the aircraft although they must have seen it, but urging their sweating mounts on with whip and spur tore past and carried on towards the distant hills. Biggles, who had stood by the aircraft ready for trouble, watched them go with a puzzled frown.

"As I said before there seems to be something going on," he remarked. "Those chaps were killing their horses and they wouldn't do that for the fun of it. They rode as if the devil himself was behind them."

"Absolutely, old boy," agreed Bertie. "Queer business. They certainly seemed to know where they were going."

The explanation was forthcoming just as the sun was sinking behind the hills like an enormous crimson balloon, flooding the plain with a fiery glow. Out of the purple shadows appeared five more horsemen, riding hard. But this time they were not Kirghiz. They were Chinese cavalry.

As soon as their nationality became apparent Biggles climbed quickly into the cockpit, telling Bertie to stand by his gun in the rear turret in case there should be trouble, which he fully expected.

As it turned out his fears proved groundless. The soldiers reined in when they saw the machine. For a little while they remained grouped, talking, apparently at a loss to know what to make of the aircraft. Which was understandable. Walking their horses they came to within fifty' yards. Biggles' hand was on the starter. Bertie crouched behind his guns.

The troops had another discussion which lasted about ten minutes. One of their number came a little nearer, made a wide circle round the Halifax without dismounting, and rejoined his companions. A minute or two later they all wheeled their mounts and rode off at a canter in the direction from which they had come.

Biggles watched them merge into the shades of twilight. Then, satisfied that they had really gone, he climbed down. Bertie joined him. "What do you make of that little lot?" he inquired.

"I think it's pretty clear," answered Biggles. "The Chinese are chasing the Kirghiz out of this particular part of the country. I imagine the

riders we saw before this lot came were Kirghiz on the run. The troops didn't know what to make of us. That isn't surprising. One can understand that it would get them guessing."

"They didn't try anything naughty."

"Why should they? For all they knew this might have been one of their own planes, or a Russian, which is practically the same thing."

"They must have seen us getting into the machine."

"Of course they did. They probably took us for Russian officers. After all, the last thing they would expect to find here would be a British aeroplane."

"True enough," murmured Bertie. "They've toddled off, that's the main thing. I thought for a moment we might be going to have a spot of bickering."

"They'd hardly risk shooting without knowing who they were shooting at," averred Biggles. "No doubt they're still talking about us. That doesn't matter. Our worry is, will they let it go at that? I don't think so. When they get back to their base, wherever that may be, they'll be certain to talk to people who will make it their business to find out who we are and what we're doing here."

"In that case, don't you think we'd better push off?"

"Push off where? It's no use going to Nan-hu in the dark, and we haven't time to get to Dacca and back here again for our appointment. I don't see any reason to panic, but from now on we'd better keep our eyes open for visitors. They'll arrive here in due course, I haven't the slightest doubt. All we can do is hope that they won't arrive before it's time for us to get mobile. If they'll leave us alone until tomorrow, we'll take off and make for Nan-hu. It would be very awkward indeed if they came during the night, because while we might manage to get off the ground we haven't enough fuel to cruise around for hours waiting for daylight."

"I see what you mean," agreed Bertie.

"Oh well, we shall just have to wait and see," concluded Biggles.

They kept watch until it was quite dark but saw no more travellers. Silence settled over the solitude. They ate a frugal meal under the stars, for the inadvisability of showing a light was too evident to call

for comment.

The night was then divided into two-hour watches, and once more in a solemn hush the long nocturnal vigil began. Biggles, who was taking the first turn of duty, squatted on a wheel and gazed into the gloom. He didn't expect to see anything even if there was anything on the plain to see; it was too dark for that. Relief would come later with the rising of the moon. Meanwhile, he relied more on his ears to warn him of any movement.

Bertie retired to the bed he had made in the cabin.

The hush did not persist for very long. It was broken by a long drawn out sigh, and cool air playing on Biggles' face told him that a breeze was stirring. At first it was welcome rather than unpleasant, for the air having travelled for miles over sand superheated by the scorching sun of noon, was only cool enough to be refreshing. But by the end of an hour, by which time the sand had given up its heat, it was a different story. It became so bitterly cold that Biggles huddled on the lee side of an undercarriage leg. Not only was it the temperature that caused him to protect his eyes and ears with his hands. The wind had steadily gained strength. It swept unchecked across the open desert with disconcerting sighs and moans that peopled the lonely spaces with the demons which local lore asserted dwelt there. Biggles didn't mind the demons. He was more concerned with the sand which, travelling on the wind, began to sting his face, and promised uncomfortable flying conditions if it got any worse.

At the end of his watch, when he handed over to Bertie, he expressed his anxiety on this account. However, as they could do nothing about it they could only hope that the wind would expire with the rising of the sun.

"You'd better wake me if it gets any worse," Biggles told Bertie. "There is this about it. I don't think we're likely to have visitors while this goes on. It wouldn't be easy to find the machine even if you knew just where it was standing."

This proved to be prophetic, for the night passed without anything serious happening. Gusts of wind occurred occasionally with the force of half a gale, but generally speaking the weather got no worse, which was as well, for when the dawn burst in the east in a riot of colour this was enough to raise a dust that reduced visibility considerably and blurred the outlines of such objects as could be seen.

It was with a sense of relief that they stood together beside the plane and watched the dawn grow into another day. The sand was irritating, and they could well have done without it, but on the whole, they told themselves, they had been lucky. Visibility at the best was about half a mile, and that was sufficient for any purpose likely to be required.

"Apparently those troops who came along didn't spill the beans about us after all," said Bertie. "If they had, I reckon we should have had callers by now."

Biggles agreed. He said he was no longer perturbed on that score. Now it was daylight they could see far enough to detect the approach of men or horses, so there could be no question of a surprise attack. On the appearance of a force larger than they thought they could handle, if such a thing should happen, he said he would avoid conflict by taking off. He said this with a nonchalance which, as things turned out, was far from justified.

It may seem strange that not for one moment did he anticipate the arrival of a visitor who used the same method of transportation as himself. Possibly it was because they hadn't seen a sign of an aircraft - since they had left Dacca. Possibly it was because he had a vague notion that as there were no Chinese airfields in that particular region, aircraft never flew over it. However that may be, the fact remains he did not give a passing thought to an aircraft other than their own. For which reason the sudden appearance of one came as a distasteful shock.

It arrived literally out of the blue. After a good look round Biggles had just gone into the cabin with Bertie to drink a cup of tea when with a shattering roar it zoomed low before screaming up in a climbing turn. Rushing to the astral dome he saw a black painted jet fighter swinging round as if for a return dive. Although he did not say so to Bertie he thought this dive would be the end of them and he clenched his teeth as he awaited the impact of the bullets. They did not come. Instead, the MiG, as he now recognised the machine to be, roared up again and then began to circle over the Halifax.

"Keep still," he told Bertie tersely. "I don't think he's seen us. He may think there's no one here."

"Where did the blighter come from?"

Biggles was beginning to think more clearly. "My guess is those troops reported a machine here and the local Commissar has sent an aircraft

out to check up. I'm pretty sure he didn't arrive here by accident."

"He doesn't seem to be doing any harm."

"Why should he? Why knock a good machine to pieces? Had he spotted us moving about outside, or had we tried to get off, I fancy it would have been a different story. Keep still. There's nothing we can do now. Our best chance is to lie doggo and kid him that the machine has been abandoned. If he thinks that he may go off to report, leaving us alone."

This apparently is what happened. The black fighter continued to circle for a little while, once coming very low, and then made off in a northerly direction.

"He must be based on one of the airfields along the Red Highway," surmised Biggles, watching the machine vanish over the mountains.

"What's the drill now?"

"We'll get off right away."

"You think he'll come back?"

"Either that or troops will be sent out. Someone might get the bright idea of dropping paratroops. You may be sure that someone at headquarters will want to know what a British Halifax is doing here. Come on. Let's get weaving."

"You're going straight to Nan-hu?"

"I am, flat out like a cloud of steam. Algy should have got a strip cleared by now. Anyway, we shall have to chance it. You keep that jet off my tail if he comes back and looks like using us as a target."

"Do I let him shoot first?"

"Not on your life. If he comes in range give him a warning burst to let him see we don't like him. If he shoots back or tries to come in let him have a rattle. This is no time for kid glove tactics. Remember, he's got the legs of us. I want to get home and we've a long way to go."

Inside five minutes Biggles was warming up his engines. Another five and the Halifax was racing tail up across the plain. At a thousand feet Biggles turned and headed for the oasis. Not needing altitude he wasted no time climbing but sped straight for the objective.

He had covered about half the distance when the MiG appeared. It was some way off, flying at right angles to his line of flight, so for a few seconds he sheered off hoping to escape observation. But this was not to be, and he knew from the way the black machine turned towards him that the pilot had spotted him.

"Tally-ho! Bandit ahead," he warned Bertie, automatically falling back on the wartime routine.

He held on his course, leaving the initiative to the jet pilot. There was still a chance, he thought, that the man would hesitate to use his guns.

This hope was not fulfilled, either, although the fighter pilot was a little while making up his mind. He swung round behind the Halifax, and sitting above the port side at a distance of about five hundred yards seemed content to watch. This did not suit Biggles at all, for in a matter of minutes he would be over the oasis, and what was he to do then with a hostile aircraft sitting over him? To land and offer himself as a target was out of the question.

In the event it did not come to this. The jet pilot, possibly thinking that the Halifax was trying to escape, or perhaps taking orders from his headquarters over the radio, suddenly launched an attack. But this was such an amateurish effort that Biggles was astonished, and could only conclude that the pilot had had no experience of combat. All the man did was take up a position above and behind the Halifax and then come straight down into the muzzle of Bertie's guns. As a tactical error nothing could have been more fatal—unless, of course, the man supposed the Halifax to be unarmed.

Biggles, watching, judged the moment the jet would open fire, and knowing that this would be from long range, pressed his foot on the rudder bar and saw the tracer pour past his wing tip.

"Okay," he told Bertie over the intercom. "Show him your muscles."

Bertie's guns snarled.

It is unlikely that the jet pilot knew what hit him. He did not alter course. With black smoke streaming aft the fighter simply steepened its dive and went straight on into the ground where it disintegrated in a sheet of flame.

"Nice work, chum," Biggles told Bertie, in the unemotional voice of one who has seen this dreadful spectacle many times before.

"Poor show," came back Bertie. "The silly ass must have thought I hadn't any bullets."

"Then he deserved what he got for shooting at us," said Biggles coldly. "This is no time to be squeamish. I'm afraid some of these new boys have a lot to learn. Keep your eyes skinned. He may have pals around. We're nearly there."

CHAPTER XIII CUTTING IT FINE

AT the oasis, after realising that discovery was now inevitable, that the food cartons had betrayed them as effectually as if they had shown themselves on the ledge, Algy and Ginger retired a little way into the cave behind them.

"We'll have a word with Ming about the secret caves there's been talk about," said Algy. "Of course, if the Tiger destroys the caves anyone inside will have had it; but if he doesn't, there's just a chance that the ladies at least might remain hidden. The alternative is to stay in the open and we might as well shoot ourselves here and now as do that."

Ginger nodded. "That's all there is to say about it," he assented. "We've done everything that could be done. We have at least that consolation. If the show has come unstuck it was through no fault of ours. We weren't to know that the whole country is swarming with gangs of cut-throats determined to bump each other off. We just got caught up in the general mess. If -" He broke off, staring at Algy's face. "Can you hear what I hear?"

Algy stared back. "I can hear a plane, if that's what you mean."

"Biggles!" Hope leapt in Ginger's voice.

"He isn't due yet."

"Who else could it be?"

"It's more likely to be a Chinese or a Russian." The drone of motors drew nearer.

"Those are Rolls engines," declared Ginger. "It must be the Halifax."

Algy listened. "You're right," he agreed. "It's Biggles."

"He mustn't land. If he does he'll step straight into the soup."

"Just a minute! Let me think."

Ginger did not know whether to be glad or sorry; whether to laugh or cry. The irony of it was maddening. Here was Biggles. The airstrip was ready. They were ready. In the ordinary way nothing could have fitted more perfectly. But with the oasis alive with the Tiger's troops, on the face of it any attempt to leave the caves would be suicidal. Algy, as if he had reached a decision, hurried along the cave.

"What are you going to do?" asked Ginger.

"I'm going to try to get in touch with Biggles by radio," answered Algy. "We brought it for an emergency. If this isn't one, what is it?"

Ginger agreed that there was never likely to be an occasion when the use of the walkie-talkie set was more justified.

They rejoined the rest of the party, who had remained in the caves to await the outcome of the battle. They had not heard the aircraft.

Algy put the position to them quickly and briefly as he picked up the radio. To Ritzen he said: "I've got to get out in the open, as near the airstrip as possible, without being seen from below. Ming knows how it can be done, I think. Ask him. Buck up, or we'll have the machine landing."

Ritzen spoke sharply to Ming, who at once jumped up and beckoned to Algy to follow him.

"You'd better come along," Algy told Ginger.

Ming led the way through a succession of caverns until they could see daylight ahead. Emerging into the open they found themselves at the extreme end of the cliff, where it broke down to the lower level. A bend hid the area of the demolished guest-house from view. The air was vibrating with the roar of aero-motors so that had there been any other sounds they would not have been heard.

Although the Halifax was so close they couldn't see it on account of the sharply rising dune behind them. The dune was smoking as the wind picked up the sand and carried it on, but they paid no attention to this. Up the steep face they scrambled and from the top found themselves overlooking the landing strip. And there was the Halifax, circling low, obviously looking for them, and no doubt wondering

why they were not in sight.

Knowing that those in the machine would soon spot them, while Algy was busy with the radio, Ginger put in some frantic visual signalling, waving his arms and pointing at the instrument in the hope that Biggles would realise what they were trying to do.

Algy wasted no time in code numbers, but started calling Biggles by name. "They're not listening," he groaned, turning a distracted face to Ginger.

"Keep on trying—keep on," cried Ginger. "One of them is bound to be on the job. What do they think we're doing?"

Algy renewed his efforts. Suddenly his expression changed. "Here we are!" he cried joyfully, and in a moment was explaining the situation, rattling out the words in short, crisp sentences.

Then, for what seemed to Ginger to be ages of time, Algy listened, apparently taking orders, occasionally cutting in with a short "Yes ... Yes." The only other sound was the bellow of the engines.

At last Algy sprang to his feet. "He's coming down," he announced breathlessly. "Listen! This is the drill. We've got to fetch everyone. Bertie will cover us from the forward turret. As soon as the machine is down I'm to run in and man the rear turret while you get the crowd on board. You'd better find out from Ritzen if Ming and Fen want to stay here or come with us. Get cracking!"

Ginger grabbed Ming by the arm and they dashed off. Reaching the rest of the party he told them tersely what was intended. To Ritzen he said: "Do the Chinese want to come with us or stay here?"

Ritzen put the question.

The two Chinese, imperturbable, started a conversation. "Tell them to make up their minds," rasped Ginger impatiently.

Ritzen answered. "They wish to stay. Ming says he must guard the caves until the Abbot returns. He will hide in a secret cave until the trouble is over. Feng will stay with him."

"Okay, if that's how they want it," rapped out Ginger. "Tell them we'll come back and drop money and food. If the Kirghiz are all dead they can keep it themselves. Come on! Let's go. Run for it! "So saying he set the pace.

Outside, the ten minutes that Ginger was away and the Halifax was coming round for its run in, were to Algy one of those awful nightmares in which one runs without getting anywhere. He dashed into the middle of the cleared ground and waved his jacket over his head until the machine was on its proper line, wheels emerging; then he sprinted to one side to give it a clear run.

The Halifax, looking monstrous through the haze of flying sand, made a perfect landing, touching down and running on to a standstill about a hundred yards from where Algy was standing—or, it would be more correct to say, had been standing, for no sooner had the wheels touched than he was racing after it to take up his station.

He was about half way when Ginger appeared on the top of the intervening dune at the head of a straggling human crocodile that broke up as the men and women forming it slid and rolled down the sloping bank of loose sand.

Algy didn't stop, but raced on to the machine, opened the fuselage door, which fortunately was on the near side—that is the port side—and jumped aboard. For a second he paused to see how the main party was faring. To his tremendous satisfaction, he saw they were well on the way; and, more important still, without any sign of pursuit. He hurried along to his station in the rear turret. Even before he reached it a burst of fire from Bertie's Brownings told him that the enemy must have arrived in sight of the machine.

When next he saw the picture it was from the rear turret, over his own guns. The main body of the refugees, some of the men helping the two women, had nearly reached the aircraft. To his surprise there were no enemy troops in sight, the reason for this being, as was presently revealed, that Bertie had just raked the crest of the dune with his guns, causing them to retire.

As he crouched waiting, Algy saw that they were really in a strong position; anyway in a stronger position than he had visualised.

The aircraft was standing almost parallel with the dune which, by this time, they knew well; for it occurred about mid-way between the landing strip and the top of the cliff, and they had climbed it many times on their journeys to and fro. The multiple guns of the Halifax were now trained on the ridge, and the appearance of a head was enough to set the guns snarling and the sand flying. As a matter of fact, heads did appear from time to time as the troops were presumably urged on by their commander. But none of the attackers

got far. Had there been time for them to make a flanking movement it might have been different; but Ma Chang must have realised that there was no time for that. The aircraft was not likely to wait for the manoeuvre to be completed.

On one occasion, about a dozen men made a determined attempt to reach the aircraft; but they could not run and shoot at the same time; and apart from that, a rifle is a poor weapon against machine guns. The guns in both turrets opened up and the attack fizzled out, the attackers going flat, either because they had been hit or because they couldn't face the deadly music.

During this period everyone got aboard. Algy knew that this was so when he heard the door slam. The engines revved up and the Halifax began, to move.

At the last moment a figure came bounding over the ridge, screaming and firing a revolver. Sunlight gleamed on gold braid and Algy recognised the frog-like face of Ma Chang. It rather looked as if the Chinese colonel, seeing the aircraft about to escape, had lost his head.

Algy could have asked for no better target. "Ah!" he breathed, and his guns streamed a long burst, longer than was really necessary, for almost at once the Tiger had dived into the sand, the revolver flying from his hand in a way that suggested he had lost not only his head but his life as well. The last Algy saw of him, before the view was obliterated by sand whipped up by the slip-stream, he was still rolling down the slope followed by his gold-braided cap.

Algy sank back in his seat, breathing fast and mopping perspiration from his face with a handkerchief that was far from clean.

Biggles' voice coming over the intercom made him jump. "Are you all right back there?"

"A bit limp, otherwise okay," answered Algy. "Good show."

"Thank you," acknowledged Algy. "What brought you along so soon?"

"The wind, mostly. I decided to take a chance on coming over in case a real storm smothered us when an enemy jet came along and sort of expedited things."

Algy replied in a startled voice. "A jet!"

"Yes."

"What sort?"

"An MiG."

"For heaven's sake! What happened to it?" "Bertie pushed it into the carpet."

"Nice work."

"Watch out! There may be more of them. It's a bit early to relax."

"Okay."

Hardly able to believe that they were really in the air on their way home, Algy settled down to watch, his eyes scanning the sky methodically, section by section, for little black specks which in a minute of time could become enemy fighters spitting death and destruction. Not for an instant did he slacken his vigilance, knowing only too well the price that must be paid in hostile skies for carelessness.

The Halifax continued to climb. The sky overhead was blue, but the earth was soon a drab, grey, featureless blur under its haze of wind-blown sand.

They were at eighteen thousand feet when the Russian Yak appeared. Algy, for all his watchfulness, didn't see it arrive. It must have come in from somewhere ahead. He stiffened to attention as the grunting of Bertie's guns broke the news. Ginger must have taken over the centre turret, for the guns there joined in. A split second later, a black shape whirled past Algy, so close that its shadow flashing across him made him wince. But his guns were hammering before it was out of range and a trail of grey vapour told him that someone had scored a hit. Anyway, apparently the Yak had had enough, for it did not turn, but roared straight on down into the heat haze. Algy watched for it to reappear but he never saw it again. From first to last the affair had occupied not more than two seconds. That's how things happen in air combat.

This turned out to be the only incident worth recording on the run home. No more aircraft were sighted.

Time wore on. The engines droned. The Halifax cruised on through a lonely world of its own at twenty thousand feet. - The mighty white-headed peaks of Thibet crept up over the horizon. An hour later they were below. Another hour and they were fading away astern.

Biggles' voice came over the intercom. "Okay, everybody. You can stand easy now."

Algy sank back in his seat, sighed his relief and closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, as he did with a start when the engines abruptly changed their note, the Halifax was driving serenely into the vast purple bowl that held the plains of Pakistan.

* * *

There the story can end, for with the end of the journey the case was, for all practical purposes, closed. No further news has come out of the war-torn heart of Asia. A week after its return the Halifax made a night flight back to Nan-hu, as Biggles insisted that it should, to drop a bag of silver and some tins of food stuffs on the landing strip. There was no sign of life at the ancient shrine, so the bags may still be lying there to this day. Ming and Feng may have been there, and supposing the aircraft to be an enemy remained in hiding. Still, the money had been dropped. A promise had been made, and a promise had been fulfilled, so Algy had the satisfaction of knowing that he had done what he had said he would do, even though there was little likelihood of any Kirghiz surviving to know of this.

As the Air-Commodore remarked when they were back at the Yard, they couldn't do more, or less.

THE END